

Homily, Lent 5, St Bartholomew's, 22 March 2026

The story of the raising of Lazarus is a remarkable story from the Gospel of John. In many ways it's as much the story of the two sisters, Martha and Mary of Bethany, as it is of Lazarus. It's also, of course, the story of Jesus and his disciples. That's because, as a result of raising Lazarus from the dead, many people come to believe in him. And that really confronts the authorities, who are afraid of his popularity, and form the plot to get rid of Jesus. In other words, the end result of the raising of Lazarus is the death of Jesus. Jesus gives up his life for Lazarus.

The story begins with the illness of Lazarus and the sisters sending a message to Jesus. We already know that Jesus can heal at a distance. He's already done that earlier in the Gospel. But instead of rushing to his friend Lazarus, Jesus stays where he is for a couple of days and then informs the disciples that Lazarus has died.

Jesus then makes the journey down to Judaea, even though he knows the authorities there have it in for him. First of all, he meets up with Martha who reproaches him for not coming earlier. She is a woman of faith but her faith is rather conventional. She believes in the resurrection, that her brother will rise again at the last day. What she doesn't realise is that Jesus himself *is* resurrection: that is, life on the other side of death. Jesus leads her into a fuller and deeper appreciation of who he is. He also shows her that resurrection is not just for the future but also for the present. That means that in situations that speak of 'death' people can find life. And that life in the dark times is to be found in relationship with him, life in the here-and-now, not just pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die.

And Martha believes. 'Yes, Lord,' she says, 'I believe that you are the Christ, the one who was to come into the world'. Martha here makes the core Christian confession. In the other Gospels it's Peter who makes that response: you are the Christ. But in John's Gospel it's a woman who makes that central claim on behalf of the community of believers.

After this, we meet Mary her sister who falls in grief and disappointment at Jesus' feet. This is a foretaste of what will happen in the next chapter, where we'll find Mary again at Jesus' feet, this time to anoint him in an act of faith and love. The mourners are also part of the scene, supporting Mary in her grief. And Jesus joins them. He too grieves. He too experiences their pain, their suffering.

But he doesn't only weep. He's disturbed in spirit and that disturbance is not just grief for those mourning Lazarus but also anger: anger at the power death has to deprive people of those they love, to cause such pain and sorrow.

And so it is in a spirit of distress that Jesus approaches the tomb of Lazarus. He has been dead for four days, in Jewish terms meaning that the soul has already left the body. He is truly dead. And yet Jesus reveals his identity as the resurrection and the life in three great commands: *roll back the stone! Lazarus come forth! Unbind him and let him go!*

When someone we love has died, we may continue to speak to them, but we know they can't hear our voice. They're beyond the sound of the human voice, or human touch or sight.. But that's not the case with the Son of God. Lazarus can hear his voice. The voice of the Son of God can penetrate the cold stone walls of our mortality. It can reach the dead. And it reaches Lazarus who obeys the command and emerges from the tomb

At the same time Jesus commands that he be freed of the grave clothes that bind him. And that's quite literally true but it's also a metaphor. Lazarus is free of the coils of death. He's free to live, to pick up his life again beyond death.

Today's story shows what it means that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. It shows that what he brings in the here-and-now is life, freedom beyond death and darkness. And what he does for Lazarus in a literal sense is what he also offers us today. Eternal life is not just for beyond the grave, but is something we can experience now, even if not completely.

And that has huge implications for our lives, for our world. It means that God can come to us now and bring us resurrection, freedom from the dark and deathly forces that surround us. And that freedom means peace and reconciliation, which are an essential part of eternal life.

We need to hear that in a world that is so full of violence and also in our own lives, within all our struggles and anxieties and pain. God offers us in Christ a hope, a love, and acceptance beyond all the forces of death.

And that new life is not just for ourselves but also for those who are our neighbours. It's life especially for those who are excluded, those marginalised, those who live their lives in the 'death' of poverty, abuse, injustice. We are to be a community of life, life in the context of death,

Today, Jesus addresses the same words to us as he does to Martha, the same commands he makes to Lazarus. Because he is the resurrection and the life, he can call to us whenever we're in a dark places, whenever we're in pain or struggling, and can give us freedom.

Let us pray that, like Martha and Mary and Lazarus, we may respond to the voice of Jesus calling us out of the tomb, out of our doubts and fears, into eternal life and freedom. And let's proclaim that message to the world around us in our words and in our actions.

*Mthr Dorothy*