

Led by the Cross—The Cross as a sign!

John 11:17–27, 38-53

Dear Friends in Christ.

Grace and peace from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We are almost in the last stretch of the Lenten season, bringing us closer to the foot of the cross where Jesus demonstrated his Love for the world through his death. Then Easter comes, proclaiming to us that his resurrection is our resurrection too. And as we come to the foot of the cross, we can't but open our eyes to the reality of our own lives, of our own death and but also of our own resurrection.

And as we make our journey through life, we realize that as Christians, the reality of our own lives is marked by the cross, which in turn becomes the sign that directs us in the path to eternal life, and our interactions with one another.

In the Gospel lesson for today, we see this sign already working, as Jesus comes to the aid of a family he loved very much. This is the story of a not so perfect family, the family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

At the beginning of the chapter John tells us that: "...a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill... ⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus..."

Mary was the sister who loved to listen to Jesus and the one who had previously lived a sinful life (Luke 7:37). Martha was the sister who loved to serve others. Lazarus was the brother who was ill. Each to their own, their own faults, their own attitudes, still Jesus loves them very much, John tells us.

Just like us, we too have our faults, attitudes, each of us, from the smallest household to the largest church family, has people who like to listen, people who like to serve, and people who are sick. Jesus welcomes us all and loves us. No matter how imperfect our families, Christ makes it worthwhile. Jesus forgives our sins and restores our relationships with each other. Just as he did with Mary whose many sins he forgave, he asked Martha to listen to Jesus and rest in his word and now is about to bring Lazarus back to life. And what does the family do? They love him back, hear his

word and depend on him. Jesus hasn't been crucified yet, but already we see the fruits of the cross in Lazarus family.

The cross as a sign helps us to see that even it seems all is lost, life begins to take place, only, it needs to be in according to God's plan and in his own time. Also at the beginning of the chapter we hear that the sister sent for Jesus, because Lazarus was sick, but when Jesus hears the call, John says: "he stayed two days longer in the place where he was." V. 5

Why would Jesus not go immediately and tend to the sick, especially since he was asked to come? But the reality is that we are marked by delays too. But we don't like delays! Why doesn't Jesus drop everything He is doing and rush over to see Lazarus? After all He was His best friend and in need?

We too have said at some point in time: "If you love me, why don't you respond immediately?" Those are the things we demand of each other, don't we? Yet the fact is sometimes the people who love us most are not the ones who will respond urgently and immediately. Often, the people who are willing to drop everything and help us are the ones least equipped to help, but we shouldn't deny them the possibility of lending a hand, while we wait for the ones who really will help us. Those who can help sometimes are not pressured by time or panic but are guided by the hope that everything will be ok, and in the case of Lazarus, it was for the glory of God that Jesus chose to delay.

Two days delay, it was a long time. But it was not because he did not love Lazarus, rather because of his plan that he delayed, Jesus is not moved by our anxiety alone, but by what he wants to accomplish in us. It is good to know that all strength, all health, is beyond our notions of time, it is in God's hands. And his response is not always as we ask but as he intends for us. O, true help is a sure thing, no doubt, but must be in God's time, so we are to learn to wait, patiently but with confidence and trust.

Then the cross as a sign helps us to see that in order for us to resurrect, we must die. "Lazarus has died" (v.14) Jesus told his disciples. At first Jesus didn't want the disciples to either be worried, or dismiss the reality of death, so he tells them that Lazarus has fallen asleep. The disciples replied, o he is betting better then. No need to hurry now. But what Jesus meant was that Lazarus had indeed died, so he tells them

plainly those words. Lazarus died. That was needed for the resurrection truth to make sense.

We need to hear that directly sometimes ourselves, don't we. Your father is dead. Your mother has died. To hear the truth directly, even the most painful and devastating truth, is a first step in healing, and in salvation itself. Indeed, to hear the truth is the first step of resurrection. Lazarus is dead. Really, for us to partake of resurrection we must die—in the flesh, to the world, to satan and sin.

But the resurrection of the death is not only for the afterlife, because it is also for here and now. Finally, six or more days after Jesus hears that Lazarus was sick, he comes to see the family, by now “Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.” So “Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.²² But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.”²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”²⁴ Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live,²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die...” John 11:17, 23-26

Jesus says, “Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.” Does resurrection mean something that happens after we die, or even now? Well, it means both. Resurrection is about life in Christ now. All these stories in the gospel of John, are about proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah who gives us a new life, a life that begins here in our baptism, a life that we are to walk in the power and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is a life that we live in the forgiveness and grace of God that come because of Christ, the Messiah. Christ is the one who walks with us and in us towards the day of the resurrection of our bodies, and even if the path he assigns us to walk becomes painful, he is there with us.

Mary and Martha loved Jesus, although, it seems that they thought that Jesus had come to fulfill their own, personal, and immediate desires. Their voice sounded like more: “If only God had been here, I would not have gone through all this pain.” But then again, that might be something we would say, right? Only Jesus did not come so much to take away our pain, Jesus came to go through pain himself. Jesus came so

that all of us could live through life, even though filled with pain, taking us safely to the resurrection, bringing us victorious at the end of the journey.

When satan tempt us with the thought that God might not be loving us because we are suffering, let us be reminded that when we suffer, Jesus suffers for us. Jesus wept for his friends, so he weeps for us as well. He feels our pain. Jesus, the Son of God, knows sorrow and weeping. Jesus can be moved and greatly disturbed. To love means to be able to be moved. Jesus is moved by Mary and Martha's sorrow and pain. Jesus is moved by our sorrow and pain too, so let us not be discouraged, but trust that we have already seen the fruits of resurrections, for he is with us already because He said so, and we know for we are His children.

Lastly, the cross as a sign helps us to free somebody else too. When Jesus came to the tomb he cried out "Lazarus, come out."

These are words of good news. They are words that could be on the lips of every one of us today. "Lazarus, come out!" Wherever we want resurrection, we should be able to shout: "Lazarus, come out! Be resurrected. Rise again!"

But first, before we cry Lazarus come out, we must realize that before resurrection things are foul and messy. Jesus commands: Take away the stone! But, Lord, take away the stone? By this time, after four days, it's going to stink.

Lord, he stinks! Resurrection doesn't happen when all is sterile and clean and smelling wonderful. Where things stink that's because they are dead, but it is there exactly where resurrection can occur! There we can cry out: "Lazarus come Out." "In the name of Christ Lazarus, come out." And Lazarus will come out.

And as soon Lazarus comes out, there is one more thing that needs to be done, Jesus gave the command: "Unbind him, and let him go." Remove the grave clothing and let him go!

I like these words as much as "Lazarus, come out." That's because now, the community needs to assist in the resurrection. "Unbind him and let him go."

There are some people yearning to live resurrection lives. There are some people who have been born again; they have risen from the dead! But they still have the sheets and coverings of death all over them. They are still bound up in something,

bound up in old bondages, old arguments, old sin. Whatever it is that binds them still, they need to let them go.

You know what that's like. You know you are living a new life, but you seem somehow to still be in bondage to the old life. Maybe it is something that happened to you even in childhood, the lifestyle you lived, or the wrongs somebody did against you, still keep you entangled in burial cloths.

This is where we need the community of faith. We need others. Often, it is the task of Christian community to complete the action of Resurrection. "Unbind him, and let him go." Jesus says. Those should be the words which are our orders every day. Unbind somebody. Wherever you find someone in bondage: your friend, your wife, your husband, your co-worker, even the stranger. Wherever you find someone struggling to be free, unbind them and let them go. Do not keep them tangled up in the old affairs of sin and death. Those clothes constrict and make us ill.

When we refuse to let something or someone go, when we refuse to forgive, when we refuse to see new life, it is we who are keeping ourselves and others dead. But the cross reminds us that we belong to Jesus, who has paid for our sins, who has given us resurrected lives, and empowers us to forgive, to set someone else free.

Yes, if we really want the world to believe, we must show forth the resurrection life of Jesus, the new life of Jesus. Can we come out of our tombs? Christ has raised us from the dead! Can we unbind someone and let them go? Christ has forgiven us our sins, and released from the bondage of sin, now he sends us to unbind others as well. In doing so, the work of Jesus will indeed be revealed, and the world will believe that he is the Savior of the World, the giver of new life.

Yes, lent and Holy Week point us to Jesus passion, death on that cross, but also to his resurrection. And they also point us to our own lives, lives that are marked by the cross of Jesus, and to our own resurrection at the second coming of Jesus, but even now, we enjoy resurrected lives.

We do so because Jesus loves us very much, he demonstrated his love by dying on a cross, and by loving Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

In his name, amen.