

Fifth Sunday in Lent—Year C

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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI

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I spent most of my 20s doing ministry with people very close to death or with families in mourning. I learned a lot about myself and the world sitting at those hospital beds year after year. It was beautiful work, and, I'll admit, a peculiar occupation for a (then) young man. If you've ever worked with people who do any kind of crisis work, you'll notice that the humor can get a little dark. It's a way to lighten the heaviness of the experience, I suppose. And it might even be a way to alleviate our own anxieties about dying. During those years, I often quipped that if people weren't in such deep denial about their own mortality, I would be out of a job.

I think it's safe to say that we are a people—a country, a city, a church—that is deeply uncomfortable with the idea of death. Our discomfort rears its head in all kinds of ways. We spend a great deal of time fighting and railing against the signs of age. We dismiss the wisdom and the stories of people after they reach a certain time in life. We have founded entire industrial empires on the premise that, if we work hard enough on it, or if we spend enough money on it, we can stay young forever. Which is, obviously, not true. Nor is it a particularly worthy goal, as far as I can tell. Understandable, yes. Worthy, no.

I believe that what lives underneath all this excessive emphasis on youthfulness, though, is an anxiety about death. About not existing. About helplessness and the loss of our fundamental selves to the ravishes of age. I think we're all scared to go to that final sleep and not to wake up again. I once was in a room full of hospice nurses, and a presenter asked how many of them had made arrangements for their own death, and almost no one raised a hand. You know it's bad when hospice nurses deny death. The impulse to ignore our mortality sits strongly on our world. I might be wrong about that, but call it a hunch informed by years of walking up and down hospital hallways in the middle of the night.

Well, preacher, thank you for bringing the room down to a depressing place. Is this really what I got up an hour early on Sunday morning to hear? Where is the good news? Where is the grace and love of God?

Bear with me while we look at this morning's Gospel story, and we'll see if the good news will present itself.

Jesus is having dinner at his friends' home in the city of Bethany. Mary, Martha and Lazarus live just outside of Jerusalem—kind of the Wauwatosa of the ancient near east—, and they have hosted a dinner for him. Imagine the friends, reclining at low tables, enjoying one another and the feast laid before them. I would guess they are laughing, telling stories, drinking wine. What makes this dinner party unusual though is that Lazarus has recently been raised from the dead. The Gospel mentions it as if it is not a big deal. “Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus,

whom he had raised from the dead.” Lazarus’ death is almost an afterthought. You might remember that this is the same Lazarus who literally had the stench of the grave on him when he was coming out of his tomb, wrapped in grave clothes. That Lazarus is now, sitting next to Jesus, eating, as if having been dead was the most natural thing in the world.

In general, I don’t think that our society is very good at letting death come sit at our table. We don’t have good language to talk about it, and we go out of our way to avoid it. But here, at Jesus’ own table, is a reminder about our mortal condition, a reminder about the grave.

I wonder if we can be inspired by the way that Jesus invites the dead man to join in the feast. We are all marked by our own mortality. We’re all given a certain number of days on this fragile planet. But having been dead doesn’t seem to stop Lazarus being able to feast with friends, feast with family or feast with God.

Think about some of the pictures you’ve seen or even places you’ve visited where the bones of saints were interred in some church somewhere. Think about our own memorial garden just a few feet from where I’m preaching, or the columbarium at our Cathedral downtown. Imagine the ancient coffins, buried underneath the floors of basilicas and shrines all over Europe. In these venerable old churches, the congregation literally shares Communion—our feast—with God and the dead from all the ages. Or, put another way, being dead doesn’t seem to stop any of us from being able to feast with our God.

This is the promise that the earliest Christians pass along to us. This is the scandal of Christianity—that death has no power to separate us from the love of God. Even the dead are welcome to the Eucharistic feast. Surely that is better than some expensive anti-wrinkle cream.

So, chin up, people of God. You are in the presence this morning of a Jesus who breaks bread with the living and the dead. There is no height or depth—no state of being that can separate you from the love of this mighty God.

Think about that today as we say the Nicene creed—remembering the living and the dead. Think about that today as we pray together the Prayers of the People—remembering the living and dead. Think about that next week as we being the walk with Jesus from life to death to life. Death is not the absence of God, as we fear. Death is, instead, a feast with God.

So take heart and be empowered by the wisdom of our faith. Be at peace in the sure knowledge that there is no place you can go and no state you can enter wherein Jesus will not want to break bread with you. That is grace. That is your absolute and freely-given inheritance. We will feast with Jesus this morning, and we will break bread with God always. Amen.