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*A Foretaste of Things to Come*

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano on

The Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 10, 2011

A couple of weeks ago I had a foretaste of summer! It was one of those beautiful spring days we had that seemed to just come and go. But it was here, and it was beautiful, and I just had to be outside. After work, I quickly changed clothes and headed into the park without my normal layers of clothing: no coat, no hat, no gloves. I felt free and unencumbered. The warmth of the air and the sunshine on my skin was glorious. It felt like summer. It felt like a promise of things to come.

I wasn't alone. There were a lot of other people also out enjoying the sunshine. Some were running. Some were walking. Some were playing with their dogs, who were also absolutely loving the weather, dashing around in reckless joy.

All around trees and flowers were beginning to bloom, forsythia and daffodils and magnolias, and everyone seemed to have a new openness and joy in their expressions. You know, not the normal wind-blown, determined expressions that you see on people's faces who are trying to get their exercise despite the weather. Rather, people were smiling and looking at each other as if to say, "Isn't this great!" "I just had to get outside too!" "Doesn't everybody know how good the sunshine feels?" It was glorious. It was a foretaste of summer in the park.

But alas it got cold and rainy again. Summer is still a ways off. But for a brief moment last week, I had a foretaste of things to come.

Our Gospel lesson for this morning, the story of the raising of Lazarus, is also a foretaste of things to come. It's not Easter yet, but it won't be long now. We have only a couple of weeks to go. The only problem is that we have to walk through the valley of the shadow of death to get there. Before we get to the trumpets of Easter, we will have to walk with Jesus on the way of the cross. And as we travel with Jesus on his way of costly service, it is good to have some signs of the resurrection to keep us going. Perhaps that's why the lectionary gives us the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead on the fifth Sunday in Lent. It's a kind of foretaste of what lies

ahead. It's a sign, in John's weighty sense of the word. It is, as Barbara Brown Taylor says, a sign "that there is a power loose in the universe that is stronger than death, stronger even than our fear of death, which is able to call us out of our ... tombs into the fullness and sweet mystery of life."<sup>1</sup>

Lazarus was Jesus' friend. In fact, our Gospel lesson tells us that Jesus loved him. His sisters Mary and Martha send word that Lazarus is desperately ill. In their message to Jesus there is a plea: *Please come. We need your help. Hurry. Our brother is sinking fast.* But by the time Jesus gets there, Lazarus has died and has been in his grave for four days. By saying that Lazarus was in the grave for four days, John is telling us that Lazarus was really dead. In popular Jewish belief of the time, the human spirit hovered near the body for three days and then departed as the corpse began to decompose. Normally death would be irreversible and all hope abandoned for someone buried four days. So when Martha and Mary come out to meet Jesus they express their grief. *He's gone. We've lost him. Lord if only you had been here our brother would not have died.*

Friends and family have gathered and in their deep sorrow they begin to weep over the loss of Lazarus. The heart of Jesus goes out to them, and he weeps with them over the death of his friend. Jesus wept with those he loved, and there is deep consolation in this. When we hurt, Jesus hurts too.

But Jesus does more than just share in our sorrows. He also offers hope. The amazing hope that death, although real and worthy of divine tears, is not the last word. The last word is life. Jesus goes to the tomb and he tells them to roll back the stone. Then he calls out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" And amazingly Lazarus comes out still wrapped in his mummy-like burial linens. Jesus then turns to the family and says, "Unbind him and let him go." Unwrap him and set him free.

The story of the raising of Lazarus is a sign, a foretaste of the resurrection. This means that while it is real and important, it only partially represents the fullness of things to come. A warm sunny day in March is beautiful, but it is not summer. It will get cold and rainy again before summer really comes. Jesus bringing Lazarus back from the dead is not the resurrection. Lazarus will die an earthly death again. Maybe he will live to a ripe old age, but it is clear that he will die again someday. The significance of the story is that it points us to the fullness of the resurrection, the fullness of the Easter proclamation that God raised Jesus, to the promise of not just continued life, but eternal life with God. Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." This is the Easter promise that someday we will know a place beyond all tears and sorrows, beyond all suffering and all death. The promise that in our Father's house there are many mansions prepared for us. The promise that someday beyond this veil of tears we will live eternally with our Lord. The promise of resurrection and life.

But in the meantime, we live in a world that is in many ways similar to the world of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Our beloved brothers and friends still get sick and die. We still gather

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<sup>1</sup> See Barbara Brown Taylor, "Can these bones live?" in *Christian Century*, March 13, 1996

together to mourn the loss of our loved ones, to weep together, and to console one another in our sorrows. Ours is still a world in which we cry out to God, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” In that cry of Martha, there is mixture of love and loss, belief and complaint. Our world is like that, love and loss, belief and complaint all mixed up together. We believe, but we can’t understand or see things fully, often times because our eyes are clouded with tears for this world. And we cry out to the Lord, where were you? If only you had been here, my brother, my sister would not have died. And the heart of Jesus went out to them, and he wept. In this world of pain and sorrow, divine tears are also shed.

But in this world, there are also genuine signs of the resurrection. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. A warm sunny day in March is a glorious thing. We do not live in the fullness of the resurrection yet, but the power of the resurrection is already touching and transforming our lives. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, “There is a power loose in the universe that is stronger than death, stronger even than our fear of death, which is able to call us out of our ... tombs into the fullness and sweet mystery of life.” The resurrection can reach out and transform our lives. It is not an easy thing, but it is possible. I have seen it at work, transforming people’s lives.

A few years back, I heard a retired priest talk about the power of the resurrection in his life. He is a recovering alcoholic, and before he got sober, he said he was literally drinking himself to death. He honestly and forthrightly spoke of how he was unable by his own power to stop his spiral towards death. But something happened to him, which he described as God reaching out to him and saving his life. He said he knew, not just believed, that the resurrection was real, because if it wasn’t he would be dead right now. The power of the resurrection can break into and transform our lives right now.

Here’s how Peter Gomes puts it: “the resurrection is God’s invitation to us to start over; and what a blessed surprise, what a glorious relief that is! Who of us here is content with things as they are? Who of us is content with ourselves as we are? Who among us does not long to be more loving, more generous, more tenderhearted, more passionate, more creative, more thoughtful, more imaginative, more useful? Who of us would not love to have the courage to act upon our convictions as opposed to our fears? ... If God can raise Jesus Christ from the dead, in the most astonishing reality the world can claim, then maybe, just maybe, something new and good can happen to me.”<sup>2</sup> The power of the resurrection can break into and transform our lives right now.

I’m not saying it is easy. I’m just saying that it is possible. I have seen married couples who had drifted apart fall in love with each other again. I have seen people who have found a new life that they never thought possible in a new relationship or a new marriage. I have seen people who have harmed each other, let go of their anger, and forgive one another. I have seen people who have spent years punching the clock gain new enthusiasm and derive real meaning from their work and their relationships at work. I have seen moribund churches and institutions come back to life transformed by the power of the Gospel. I’m not saying it’s easy, but it is possible. Right here, right now, even in the midst of this world of pain and sorrow, the power of the resurrection can grasp us, can call us out of our tombs, can turn our lives around. And that is

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<sup>2</sup> See Peter Gomes, *Strength for the Journey* (San Francisco: Harpers, 2003)

why when Jesus says “I am the resurrection and the life” that is Good News, not just for him, but also for us, for our tired old souls, for our tired old bodies, for our tired old minds, for our tired old whatevers; Good News because the one who is the resurrection and the life calls us out of our tombs real or imagined, summons us forth so that we may walk in newness of life, and calls us to be new people here and now by the power of the resurrection.

Jesus’ friend Lazarus died. Jesus wept over the death of his friend. Then he cried out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” and amazingly he came out. The Jesus said, “Unbind him and let him go.” Unwrap him and set him free. Jesus is still coming into our lives. When we hurt, he hurts. And he is still calling out with the promise of new life. Unbind us too, Lord, and set us free.