

Today's reading features one of the pivotal stories in John's gospel, the raising of Lazarus. It is the last major sign or miracle of Jesus before his passion, so it is fitting that we feature it on this, the 5th Sunday of Lent. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday and the start of Holy Week. Easter is in sight, just over the horizon. We've heard this story many times over the years and it is told with great drama and emotion by John. Up to this point in John's gospel, the name Lazarus has not been spoken. We have a sense of Martha and Mary, but this brother is new to the scene. We're not told if Lazarus was a good man or particularly holy, but clearly Jesus and Lazarus were good friends. The village of Bethany was very close to Jerusalem, and you can imagine Jesus going over to Martha and Mary's house on occasion to kick back, unwind, and share a beer with Lazarus. You know, guy talk. So here's the rub. Why does Jesus delay two days before heading over to see his dying friend? Two days.

On July 14, 1987, a man named Thompson (name changed to protect his privacy) was arrested in Los Angeles with two of his friends. The charge was murder in the first degree, the drive-by shooting of a rival gang member. The evidence was pretty clear – a nearby video surveillance camera caught the whole incident. Thompson was driving the pickup truck and the shooters were in the truck bed, popping up to shoot when the time was right. It didn't matter that Thompson hadn't pulled the trigger – he was an accessory to the crime and got the full weight of the book thrown at him. He was sentenced to 27 years to life. Thompson had a unique quality not often seen in criminals. He admitted his guilt and took responsibility for what he had done. From day one of his incarceration, he decided to be a model prisoner and quickly found solace in his Christian faith. But life in prison is anything but easy. Given the length of his sentence, family members quickly shrugged him away from their lives, and personal visits stopped. Stone walls reinforced the image that Thompson came to identify and adopt – for all intents and purposes, he was in the tomb.

Jesus finally starts his journey to Bethany, with a confidence that puzzles the disciples. By now it is known that Lazarus has died. Why go at all? It's dangerous – you could be stoned to death. Jesus is insistent, however, and soon they draw near to Bethany. Martha comes out to find him and her words must have cut Jesus to the bone – *if you had been here, my brother would not have died*. Jesus insists that something good is going to happen, but Martha seems unconvinced. Soon sister Mary arrives and her words are exactly the same as Martha's – *if you had been here, my brother would not have died*. Twice accused of uncaring, twice accused of *being late*, even Jesus the God-man of John's gospel cannot hold back his emotions. He weeps with all of humanity at the indignity, the fear, and the unfairness of death. Jesus cries and cries.

Meanwhile, like Lazarus, Thompson is in the tomb called state prison. He counts the days, the months, the years, hoping against hope that his good behavior will get him early parole. It takes 25 years, but the call finally comes. He comes up for a hearing – it's 2012. He tells his story, expresses his sorrow, waits for the judgment and is denied. We'll check in with you again in 2 years, he's told. Thompson goes back to his cell and cries and cries. Why, oh God, have you abandoned me? I've done all that you ask! Why don't you set me free?

Sometimes we forget that our God is a Trinitarian God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We perhaps fixate on one of the persons of God and forget that the other two can also be acting at the same time, but in different ways. Jesus knows this intuitively, but Thompson is in the dark. The day after his parole hearing, Thompson gets an invitation to the Kairos retreat at Donovan State Prison. He asks what it is, and is told that they serve cookies. Maybe you'll feel better, they say, if you eat some homemade cookies. Sounds like something any Mom would do after you fall and skin your knee. Have a cookie. They have curative powers, these cookies. Ever notice? Thompson goes.

Over four days, Thompson is listened to, hugged, fed, and sung to. His spirits rise in response, and he vows to keep on plugging away, keep being patient, keep trusting. The two years pass quickly and once again he is called before the parole board. It is 2014. He tells his story, expresses his sorrow, waits for the judgment and is denied. Come back again in 3 years, he's told. Three years? Last time it was two! Sorry, he's told, new rules have come down from the State. Thompson is devastated, especially when he hears that one of his accomplices is being set free right now. The quixotic parole decision process defies logic, and Thompson weeps.

A friend of Thompson's from the last Kairos weekend sees him the next day. How would you like to work an upcoming Kairos weekend as one of the inside support team? What would I do, he asks? You can serve cookies. So he does, and once again the combination of Christian men, good food, and the knowledge that someone cares makes a difference. Somewhat to his surprise, he finds that serving the other inmates cookies is hugely rewarding. He feels *useful*. After 27 years of being told that you're useless, someone tells him that he's needed, wanted, and capable.

You see, the reason that Jesus waited for two days had nothing to do with being lazy or indifferent or even manipulative. Jesus knew that the Holy Spirit was keeping Lazarus company in the tomb. Lazarus was being listened to, hugged, fed, and sung to. Lazarus was just fine. But no one would ever believe this if he just said so. So Jesus shows the world what he knows to be true, the glory of God. *Lazarus, come out!*

It's October, 2015, less than 18 months after being denied parole for the second time. Thompson gets the call for a new hearing. Why? Why go through this again? He knows the outcome already. But he goes. He tells his story, expresses his sorrow, waits for the judgment and the Board says, "The family of the victim have had a change of heart. The police chief also agrees that you are no longer a danger to society. Parole granted." Thompson weeps. In the distance, he hears the stone beginning to move.

Not so fast. According to state law, there is a mandatory 150-day waiting period before he can be released. 150 days. Nearly five months. This is a truly terrifying time for an inmate. The word gets out that you have a release date and many jealous men who have no chance at such redemption attempt to sour the deal. They'll attack you without provocation, hoping you'll get into a fight, or accuse you of stealing things, or otherwise tempt you into trouble. It's called being *punked*. Some men on the verge of release ask

to be put in the hole, into solitary confinement, so that they can't be punked. They'd take over 100 days in solitary rather than risk the jealousy of the yard. But Thompson isn't worried. He has built many friendships over the years. His faith, his kindness, and his good will are now paying off. His friends accompany him everywhere, never leaving him alone in the yard, a protective barrier around him. Some of the correctional officers help as well, warning him of rumors and bad actors.

On day 140, a call comes over the prison loudspeaker. Thompson, report to building E. He comes before the desk officer, who keeps typing away at something, indifferent to the man standing there. Finally she looks up, gives a sly smile, and asks, "You got someone to pick you up?" Thompson races back to his cell to get his things and as he enters the cell block, he sees all of the inmates in the block, over 100 of them, waiting on the top tier. Grinning from ear to ear, they give Thompson a huge cheer, witness the stone rolled away, and watch Thompson walk out of the tomb.

This gospel is for anyone who is in a tomb, whether it is a tomb of illness, of unemployment, of addiction, of homelessness, or of schizophrenia. God has not abandoned you. And if you love someone who is in a living tomb today, do not despair. While you're praying to Jesus, the Holy Spirit is in action. While you're praying to God the Father, Jesus is walking with your loved one. And if you're praying to the Spirit, God the Father is creating new life. As Jesus asks Martha today, "*Do you believe this?*" Do you believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life? Thompson certainly did.

When Lazarus comes out, he is bound up in burial strips, much like an Egyptian mummy. Jesus said, "Untie him and let him go." Thompson gave me this rubber bracelet recently. It is inscribed with two dates, sort of like a tombstone. 7/14/1987 to 3/9/2016, just 4 months shy of 29 years. There's one other notation here – *God is good*.