

“March Madness in April?”

+ 5 Lent + A

John 11:1-45

April 6, 2014

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. The text for this morning's message is the Gospel lesson which was just read.

Tomorrow night on April 7th we will finally have an end to what has become known as *March Madness* as Kentucky and UConn battle for the NCAA basketball crown – this year made even more interesting with Warren Buffet's \$1 Billion prize to whomever entered the contest for the “perfect bracket.” (His \$Billion is safe – no one guessed correctly). But we are not here to discuss that journey of “Madness” to a crown of fading glory but to continue our annual journey to Jerusalem with Jesus each March often ending in April. We journey to Jerusalem, where Jesus went to Calvary wearing a crown of thorns bearing all our sin and shame that long-ago spring, in Palestine.

Last week you reflected on a man born blind, healed on the Sabbath by a rule-breaking Messiah. This now no-longer blind man was kicked out of the synagogue for the crime of telling the truth. That expulsion marked him as *adead man walking* in the land of the living - not that he cared because in his blindness he had called out to the Living Lord whom he had then seen face-to-face. Such a tremendous miracle would never go unnoticed. Every sign and wonder made Jesus more of a threat to the life the Pharisees and Sadducees had come to enjoy; the wealth and power they wanted to protect as they worked “in league” with the Romans. Jesus was not the Messiah these power brokers wanted so they were seeking ways to discredit His ministry, end his preaching of the Kingdom, and, if need be, to cause His death.

Before us in today's Gospel we have Lazarus, literally dead and brought back to life in front of a crowd of witnesses, many of whom came to believe in Jesus causing an even greater uproar to try and silence for those who wanted Him dead. It was another kind of “Madness,” not shooting hoops with screaming collegiate fans, but a deadly madness of “malice with forethought,” as Jesus' enemies became willing to stain their hands with innocent blood, because of the **good** He had done. There was even talk of killing Lazarus to get rid of the proof that Jesus is the Son of God.

That's right. Jesus was judged guilty of death for the **good** He had done. Next week, on the Sunday of the Passion, as well as the liturgies of Holy Week, we'll turn our attention to those events. Today let's journey to Bethany only a week or so before that triumphal entry to this town two miles outside of Jerusalem. It was in Bethany that Jesus had often stayed in the house of Lazarus, Mary & Martha, taught about the Kingdom of God and feasted with them. Their home was a "second home" for him and his disciples. But this morning it is not to the house where Martha worked in the kitchen while Mary sat at the feet of Jesus that we journey to but just outside of town – closer to the graveyard which was far enough to remove the contamination of death from the God-fearing Jews, yet close enough for mourners to walk to often in the days following the death of a loved one to honor them, weep and pray.

Anyone who has ever wept at the grave of a loved one understands in their own way what Mary, Martha and, even, Jesus felt as they stood outside the cave where Lazarus had been laid to rest. Whether it is the death of a friend, family member, child or someone given long years to live death always brings the pain of separation and a finality to a relationship, be that one we will cherish and miss or with someone from whom we are estranged. Added to this particular grief for Mary and Martha was an unanswered question as to why their dear friend, Jesus, had let their brother die.

If you have ever prayed for the sick, you have done exactly what Mary and Martha did when Lazarus was ill - they summoned Jesus. We do it in prayer. They did it in person. From their statements, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died" we understand they had wanted a healing for their brother. Who of us wouldn't? But Jesus delayed in answering their summons. God continues to do that in answer to our prayers, doesn't He? That old maxim "prayer changes things," is accurate, but not predictable. Sometimes prayer changes people and what seems to be a delay is really a process by which you and I are prepared to accept an outcome far different from that which we prayed and longed for.

So, Jesus' reason for staying away might have a place in your spiritual life right now and mine, too, drawing us into this text as participants. A sickness, a problem, a struggle, you are in the midst of at this moment might be the opportunity for God's glory to shine through as you wait and wonder, led by the Spirit to trust God and to truly mean it when you say, "Your will be done." That is never easy as it often causes us to doubt God's love for us when our prayer is not answered as we would have liked it. I believe that is why John included the note "Jesus loved

Mary, Martha and Lazarus” even though He stayed away. There is never a question as to whether God loves you – but the answer you seek may not be the answer you receive.

The disciples were a bit confused by the delay, as well. When Jesus told them they were going to Bethany to wake Lazarus, they said, “let him sleep,” they thought he was in the comfortable sleep that comes after a fever has broken and a person is on the road to recovery. Jesus had said this sickness would not end in death, after all. And, He was telling the truth. It didn’t end in death, it ended in resurrection.

The other issue on the table was that the disciples knew how dangerous it was for Jesus to go to Jerusalem as His enemies had recently tried to stone Him to death. It was dangerous for Him and for them – sheer madness, humanly speaking. You have to admire Thomas for suggesting to the others, “Let us go that we may die with Him.” That is a bold and brave statement of faith but it didn’t turn out that way for the disciples. One betrayed Him, another denied him, the rest deserted Him, but it does give us insight into the heart of this disciple who is always remembered as Doubting Thomas.

The rest of the story you know. Lazarus was dead and buried for 4 days. Mourners, both amateur and paid professionals gathered at the house and the grave going back and forth to the tomb several times a day to do the last thing anybody can do for those who have died, weep and eat from the funeral food prepared by neighbors and friends. And that would have been the end of it after about a week. After all, dead is dead and after not many days even with 100 lbs of aloe and other spices what Jesus was warned about would have been true: "Lord, He stinketh," is how I remember that verse from childhood (in the Benke household it was a reminder to take a bath or wash your feet after you took off your sneakers). By this time at the tomb of Lazarus there would have definitely been a bad odor, he’d been in the tomb four days. “Lord, already there is a stench” is the latest translation of the protest Martha offered when Jesus asked to have the stone rolled away. Four days dead - past the time the Jews thought anyone could spontaneously be returned to life. Dead, buried and decomposing, to get technical. You don’t get any more dead than that, physically speaking, anyway, and death is something all of us face.

Yes, today the Gospel takes us to the grave of someone JUST LIKE US because one day, our loved ones will be at our graves or gathered around an urn full of our ashes and all we will be is “remains.” And the greatest, only true comfort they can have is the good news that you and I

knew and know and are eternally known by and in the presence of the ONE who holds the power of life over death - JESUS. Jesus – who brought Lazarus back to life from certain beyond a doubt death.

Now I'm sure everyone was surprised, amazed and happy to see Lazarus alive and well but think of it - poor Lazarus yanked back from the rest of the blessed dead, where there is no sin and death - suddenly surrounded by the stench of this sin filled world once again. This was no favor that the Lord did for Lazarus as Jesus said: "this illness is for God's glory." Lazarus was raised from that stinking tomb that we might know and believe that the One who holds the power of life and death - who walked through the valley of its shadow, holds our lives in His hands now and into eternity. Jesus, who wept at the awfulness of death, stands with us and weeps at the awful effects of sin in our lives: illness, loneliness, suffering, disease, broken relationships, the loss of mobility, wounded people, and every day ordinary painful struggles - the little deaths we face each day. This life of sin in a sinful world was not what God ever intended when humanity was created.

And in the face of it all we are asked, like Martha was by Jesus after he said, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." WE ARE ASKED: "Do you believe this?" Her answer sounded like MADNESS, still, standing face to face with the one who could have kept her brother from dying, she loves and trusts in Jesus and says, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

Martha must have been amazed when Lazarus walked out that tomb, who wouldn't be, but it was just an affirmation of the faith she had already confessed, an affirmation of just Who her friend Jesus really was and is: "the Christ, the Son of God." The death and resurrection of Lazarus was done for all who would believe – Lazarus was raised for your and my benefit! Lazarus was raised so we might stand in humble awe of our friend and brother, Jesus, Who has walked this same earth and gone through death's door and emerged victorious on the other side.

That's where our journey takes us each Lent, each Sunday, to be truthful and where we will focus all of Holy Week. But for today let's just pause here to worship, lifted to the heavens by glorious choruses of praise, leaving behind the madness of our world and our own chaotic

lives and simply allow ourselves to be amazed and in wonder at the power of Jesus over life and death. Jesus, firstborn from the dead who stands before us as the only one who has been to the place we least want to go, the grave and conquered it so we, too, will rise from our graves and go with Him to the place He has gone to prepare for us. Amen.

Now may our almighty God and Father who sent Jesus into the world to set us free from sin and death, breathe His spirit upon us that we may be raised to new life in Christ, that we may serve Him all our days, and see Him when those days have ended.