



THE NEW SHOFAR

Do not allow the spark of discord and enmity to smoulder. The longer you wait, the more the enemy tries to cause confusion and pain among you. St Marcarius of Optina

LENT 5

Following Jesus because He is the Way, the only Way to Life

In the background to today's Gospel story of Lazarus is another story, one that is building momentum. It contrasts those who believe in Jesus with the religious leaders who are becoming more and more threatened by Jesus and the signs of God's power working in him. Just before heading to Bethany, Jesus left Jerusalem under the threat of being stoned. After he raises Lazarus, the religious leaders will conspire in earnest to kill Jesus. No wonder Thomas says to the other disciples, *We might as well go too, so we can also die with him.*

Jesus is clear about his purpose from the very beginning. Everything he does has one goal: to glorify God. This explains why Jesus waited before setting out for Bethany. This final miracle will surpass the signs Jesus had already performed. For those who still questioned whether or not he was Messiah, this final act needed to be definitive.

We know Mary's pain: where was God when we needed him most?

When Martha says to Jesus, *If you had been here, my brother would not have died*, it's hard to tell if she is confessing her faith in Jesus and his power to heal, or if she is accusing him of neglecting his friend. What she is in fact doing is highlighting the tensions that come with faith in Him as our Messiah. Faith requires trust, a confidence that God has the situation in his safe hands if we stay with him.

Either way, Jesus tells her, *I am the resurrection and the life*, and then he challenges her. If she believed that to be true, she would not be grieving as she is. But it is difficult to defy what we see and feel with our human limitations. This is why the challenge: can you believe now, in this particular situation? Or, is your faith limited to those areas where believing is easy, where it makes sense? He does not ask whether she has faith, as though faith was a commodity she could possess in her mind or her heart. It is an active "doing", a verb. Are you believing? *Yes, Lord*, she tells him. In the hopelessness of the present darkness, *Yes, Lord, I am believing.*

But why was Jesus weeping?

Where have you laid him? Jesus asks. In a couple of weeks, another Mary will ask this same question as she looks into an empty tomb. She will weep as Jesus does now. Here, in this long passage of scripture, we find the shortest verse in the entire Bible: *Jesus wept.* Why then did Jesus weep? Those around him assumed it was for sorrow at the loss of his friend. But Jesus knew before he ever headed out to Bethany that he would be raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus wept, not because he had lost

a friend, but because the scene around him was full of chaos, full of the very suffering he had come to eliminate once and for all. Hope for resurrection had been displaced by the havoc of sin and death. Those who accompanied Jesus to the tomb did not understand that Jesus wasn't weeping for Lazarus; he was weeping for *them*.

Lazarus is not the only one entombed by "death"

Death stinks. That is a part of John's background message. There is no getting around it. Imagine waking up in that cave, wrapped tightly in cloth, unable to pull the covering off your own face because your hands are still bound. It's dark, and it stinks in there. What you smell is your own rotting flesh, a body that is weirdly not rotting anymore. But the stench is still hanging in the cave around you.

Then you hear a familiar voice, muffled, but easy to recognize. Your dearest friend is calling to you to come out. But in the darkness you are not even sure how to find the door, or how you are going to get out. Still, you wriggle around enough to get up, and you inch your way toward the light. As you trip over yourself in battling to move the stone, you struggle to get free and hear a gasp from the crowd that has gathered outside this cave. They are as surprised to see you as you are to be there.

This is the point at which we need to make a decision. Do we fall back into the tomb, or do we trust God enough to step out into the unknown? It is not going to be easy though, as allowing ourselves to be healed and forgiven opens up new territory. It is not easy to believe our particular sins can be forgiven. No one has ever been completely, unquestionably dead (steeped in sin) and then been called back to life after being buried in a tomb for four days. Only God can do that. Only God wants to do that and it is only in Christ Jesus can we find the fullness of life both for ourselves and as a gift we can offer to others by freeing them from their tombs.

And here we are. As we stumble forward, that voice we love says, *Unbind him\her. Let him\her go*. And the bandages come off. We can see Jesus standing there, tears streaming down his face, welcoming us back to life. Therein is the glory of Lent, that time of sacrifice and self-discipline leading us to die with Jesus on Good Friday, that we can rise with Christ on Easter Sunday morning.

Death stinks. There's no getting around it – and sin is spiritual death

Herein is the Gospel challenge: we cannot experience resurrection until we experience death. We have to understand we stand at times inside a tomb of our own making and need to hear the voice of Jesus calling: *Come forth! Be free!* We cannot accept new life in Christ *until* we allow our old, sinful lives to end. We might be able to light a candle or two in our tombs and see for a while, convincing ourselves that all is well. But we are still in our tomb. Which is why Jesus stands there calling us.

In these closing days of Lent, more than ever we should be asking ourselves: What do we need to let die, so that we can come out of our tomb? What binds us to death, and prevents us from living abundantly, fully, as a new creation? Whatever shape and form our "tombs" take, Jesus stands outside, gently, persistently calling, inviting.