

Lent 5 Year A

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The Very Rev. Sylvia Sweeney, Ph.D.

Of all of the passages in the Gospels, this might be my favorite. And it is a passage that speaks volumes to this moment in our world. It speaks about the nature of God and the nature of the human condition. It speaks about the distance between a spiritual giant and every day people, and the way in which compassion built the bridge between them. It speaks of life and death and grief and comfort, and it speaks of trust. The kind of trust that we can't access through our intellectual efforts, but only through our hearts.

Right now our hearts are heavy, and we wish as Mary and Martha did that Jesus were right here making things all right, working some kind of miracle, intervening to protect us from this plague. I suspect we have all summoned him in our prayers. Come quickly Lord before it is too late! What's keeping you? Why aren't you here? Don't you know how much we need you right now? You are the only one who can help. Why are you delaying?

But we already know as this story begins that Jesus see the world through different eyes. He does not believe in the finality of death. So much so that he stays where he is and does not immediately heed the plea to come and help. Now one could and many probably have built a sermon around the promise of our faith that Christ has conquered death and that what awaits us after death is what awaited Lazarus: the voice of Jesus calling us out of the tomb and into full and unbound life. But that seems to me, especially in this day and this time, to be a sermon that comes from the head at a time when we are living our lives from our hearts.

Being told in the midst of a pandemic that even if we die, we will be resurrected into eternal life does not give me comfort! That is too abstract and distant a message to reach into my deepest most fearful and exhausted places. For me the comfort to be found in this passage is a comfort that comes from closeness in our hearts.

Jesus the theologian may be and is right about the nature of death, but that is not the

Jesus I need today. Jesus the friend whose compassion, whose shared pain at witnessing the deep grief and pain of his dearest friends, a compassion that wells up from deep within him and causes him to act passionately, even recklessly out of love. That is the Jesus I long for these days.

Like many of you I have had a bad week. Sometimes crises and tragedies like we're living in bring out the best in people and occasionally, I suspect many of us have witnessed in the last two weeks, crises can also bring out the worst. When we are confronted with people at their worst at this moment of our own fragility, it is hard to get our bearings and shake off something that we might shrug at in a different time. I suspect that you have, as I have, relied on the support of friends and family, neighbors and other church members to work your way through the hardest moments of this crisis.

I have a friend who I have almost every month of the last 11 years had lunch with once a month. He takes "the dean" out to lunch and has made it his job to help me see reason when I'm being irrational, to remind me of my priorities, to tell me to buck up when I'm feeling sorry for myself, to remind me to hope when I am filled with pessimism, and to offer appreciation and affirmation when I am tempted to doubt myself or my abilities.

This week when I was having my bad week, I called him and he tried to say over the phone all the things he would usually say to me in person. He worked at being empathetic and also completely rational about a situation I was livid about. He tried to talk me down from the ledge over the phone, and he could tell that it was only sort of working until he said. I just wish I could have lunch with you!

That was the most reassuring, most comforting, most calming thing he could say to me. He got that I needed more than a voice. I needed a body to be with me. To not just hear but see and feel the hurt and the anger and the pain of this moment. And somehow when he said that I could remember all the conversations across the restaurant table that we had had over the years. All the words of encouragement. All the one eye brow up "Did you really say that out loud?" looks he's given me. His emotional connection to me came through, and while it

didn't fix the situation, it gave me comfort. It told me that I was not alone in this moment and I was not crazy to be feeling what I was feeling.

If we listen to today's Gospel carefully even in the English and much more dramatically in the Greek we hear Jesus go from being the teacher, the wise dispassionate rabbi who knows that death is not the last word to Jesus the companion on life's most painful journeys. Jesus who weeps when we weep. Who rails when we rail? Who wants nothing more than to bring an end to our suffering and to wipe away the tears from our eyes?

That is the Jesus we need today, and that is the Jesus who will be with us spiritually most assuredly if we have honed the capacity to enter sacred time. But also so much more tangibly through one another. In the voice that hears our pain in this unholy moment and from a well of compassion says, "I wish we could have lunch!"

Who are those people in your life? Who are the people who cannot help but weep when you are weeping? Who choose to walk alongside when you are afraid or lost? I invite you to stop and imagine their faces and know that they are bringing life and freedom and resurrection to you this day just as surely as Jesus brought life to Lazarus and comfort and joy to Mary and Martha.

Grief is not a burden that should be carried alone. It is a burden to be shared. God weeps when we are weeping. God never leaves our side when we are feeling totally alone, and God sends us messengers to speak the comforting words, to look into our eyes and see our tears, to touch our wounded hearts and bring us back to hope. In the coming days and weeks, may the Jesus who wept at the pain and grief of his friends Mary and Martha and Lazarus, who embraced their anguish, and helped them reach past the limits of their faith. May this saving life giving, death defeating presence visit you, comfort you, and bring you to a day of rest, of joy, and of peace.

