

**If You Were Here?**  
**John 11:1-7, 17-45**  
**April 2, 2017 – Fifth Sunday of Lent**

The story of the Raising of Lazarus is one of the richest in the entire Gospel. First it's seen as a precursor of Jesus' own resurrection. If Jesus can raise Lazarus from the dead, we should not be surprised by the Good News of Easter Sunday.

Secondly, this story is often cited as a turning point in the Gospel. This is the point where the Jewish authorities said, "Now he's gone too far. Now we need to do something. We've got to put an end to this." The key verse here is the last verse of today's reading: "Many of the Jews who came with Mary and saw what Jesus did believed in him." (John 11:45) Indeed, Jesus was continuing to gain followers, contrary to the traditional teachings of the Jewish leaders.

But, as I read scripture, as I meditate on God's word, often something new will "pop out" at me; and that was the case with this story. I was literally lying in bed one morning contemplating this sermon; and, as sometimes happens, the Spirit spoke to me. Suddenly the words, first spoken by Martha and later reiterated by Mary popped into my head: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." I thought, "Wow. . . Lord, if you had been here." And, along with that thought, came those all important words at the end of Matthew's Gospel: "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Now we obviously have a timing issue here; and I'm not criticizing Mary and Martha. It was the resurrected Jesus that spoke that promise at the end of Matthew; and it's the pre-resurrected, earthly Jesus that Mary and Martha were addressing. No, I'm not finding fault with Mary and Martha. Rather, I'm finding a blessing for each and every one of us who call ourselves Christians; because we need never utter those words – "Lord, if you had been here." You see Jesus is always here, walking beside us, leading us, guiding us, protecting us, loving us. What a blessing!!! There are no "if's" in the Christian faith. God gave his Son for us, and God gave his Son to us. What a gift!!!

To Martha's if-you-had-been-here statement, Jesus makes a more Johannine promise. You know it – "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." (John 11:25) They're words we hear frequently at funerals; but they ought not be relegated only to funerals, because they are worlds of life. They are a huge promise, a promise that death is not the end and a promise that a life in faith does not end at death. Jesus said, "I will be with you always."; and, friends, "always" means "always." Jesus walks with us every step of the way through this life; and yes, Jesus walks with us as we transition from this life to the next; and

finally Jesus dwells with us in the glory of life beyond the grave. That's the promise.

I've stated before that I wonder how our lives might be different if we really maintained an awareness that Jesus is always with us, always standing beside us, watching our every move, listening to our every word. Jesus is walking beside us to give us both guidance and strength. How often might Jesus be whispering in our ear, "Are you sure you want to say that? Are you sure you want to do that? Why are you thinking that?" That might be a scary thought. But, at the same time, it's a wonderful thought, a freeing thought to know that, no matter the circumstance, we can call on the Lord who is always by our side. If we need courage to face the future, we can call on the Lord. If we need hope in the midst of despair, we can call on the Lord. If we need strength in the midst of our weakness, we can call on the Lord. If we need joy in the midst of our sadness, we can call on the Lord. And most of all, most important of all, if we need to know that we are loved, we can call upon the Lord.

Friends, I can't think of a better definition of freedom than to be free from doubt, despair, weakness, sadness, and loneliness. And thus, Jesus last words in our Gospel lesson for today: "Jesus said to them: "Unbind him, and let him go." Unbind him from the grave clothes, yes. But also unbind him from the darkness of death. Unbind him from the loneliness, the helplessness, the emptiness of the grave. "Let him go." Let him go free because true freedom only comes from our relationship with the living Christ.

Jesus said, "Remember, I am with you always." We, as Christians can never rightly say, "*If* you were here..." for Jesus is always here. Praise be to God for the gift of his only Son, our Savior and our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. . .

Lord,

Let us never forget your eternal presence with us;  
and let us live lives in the light of that presence.

Amen.

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