

The Fifth Sunday in Lent ~ Year A  
March 9, 2008  
The Reverend Amy H. Morehous

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## “In the Name of God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”

We were called today to Lazarus’ house, in Bethany. He is ill, so ill, and his sisters Martha and Mary, are beside themselves. I don’t blame them. He isn’t looking well at all, and who knows what will happen to them if he...well, maybe we shouldn’t think about it. But those two women, no husbands, no sons...without Lazarus’ protection...well, it’s difficult. We all feel for them...but they sure have spent a lot of time with some suspicious characters.

I’m not one to judge, but...you know who I mean. They’ve sent for that great friend of theirs. Jesus, son of Joseph, of Galilee. Galilee, of all places. They seem to set a great store in him as a healer. And, you know, some say he’s not just a healer - but a prophet. Here, they keep talking about him, over and over. Martha keeps asking “When will Jesus come? He should be here! We sent that messenger days ago! If only he were here...” and then she will lapse into silence, and go get another cool, wet cloth to put on Lazarus’ hot forehead. But, frankly, I think it’s a false hope. Why would he...there was such a ruckus here the last time. He went and taught in the temple – imagine, teaching to the great men in the temple? I mean, The Temple! Shoving his way in, that carpenter’s son, shocking all the Pharisees and the righteous people with his teachings. Such things are just not done. You know, there was a woman on trial there for adultery, people were sharpening their stones, ready to condemn her, to see justice done, just as it is written in the law...and they brought her before Jesus, and he spoke out in her favor! He told them all, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” I mean, who does this Jesus think he is! I’m sure you heard what a mess he made in the temple...well, people haven’t stopped talking of it since! I heard he said, “Anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life.” Can you imagine? And healing...on the Sabbath day, even! Well, Jesus was nearly stoned himself. Then the temple guards were going to arrest him but he was too slippery for them. I heard he and his followers escaped across the Jordan.

And now Martha and Mary seem to think he’s going to risk his life to come back here, for them. For Lazarus. Even if all those stories of healing are true.... I mean, like I said, I’m not one to judge, but I just don’t think...well, I think they hope in vain. Wait...I hear a cry. I think this is the end for him, poor man. But you mark my words...if that Jesus comes back here, there’s going to be trouble.

Well, Lazarus died yesterday. Oh, I wish you'd seen the faces on Martha and Mary. Martha was just...cold. That great stone face, pale and exhausted. She was such a faithful nurse to her brother...by his side night and day. And Mary – Mary weeps. She'll cry until she exhausts herself, until Martha places a hand on her head, strokes her hair, and then she'll quiet herself, hugging her arms to her chest.

We all processed to the tomb yesterday, walked out of the city bearing the body, and placed it in the tomb, and we all sang our songs, and said the prayers. Then they worked to roll the stone to cover the entrance, and then Martha did break – I saw her face crumble, and tears begin to roll down her cheeks, and she and Mary clasped each other. On the walk back to town, Mary turned to Martha, and said, "He...he never came. Jesus never came." Martha's face twisted for a minute, but she merely patted Mary's arm, and they continued on to town, silently.

So now we sit together, remembering Lazarus, taking turns sitting with Mary or with Martha. People are in and out all day, telling stories about Lazarus, about his boyhood. Occasionally those stories will bring a smile from Mary. But not Martha. She seems beyond listening, most days. I think she's worried. I don't know...I don't know what will happen to them now, either. I hope that God will be good and provide. I know I may be a little suspicious of some of their...friends, but Martha and Mary have good hearts. And I know that their brother was a good man, and they miss him. Even my old, hard heart hurts for them.

It's been four days now since we carried Lazarus to the tomb, now, and you...you just won't believe what has happened since! We were all sitting, talking quietly amongst ourselves, and there comes a great cry from outside! Jesus has returned! And I think, well, some timing he has. He's missed everything! But he did come – I guess that's something after all. Martha rushes out, and I'm torn. I want to see what's happening, but Mary's staying behind, and.... I look at Mary, and she nods at me, giving me permission to follow. Most of the others stay behind with her, so I leave, hurrying, and come up to the group just in time to hear Martha telling this fellow that if he'd been there, Lazarus wouldn't have died! Well...they say Jesus did open the eyes of that blind man...maybe he could have done something for poor Lazarus. But he didn't – he didn't even get here in time to see him before he died. They say a few more words to each other...and then Jesus seems to notice that Mary is missing. At his questions, Martha says she'll go fetch her, and she leaves. I'm left watching this Jesus, and his companions. They don't look like much really...you'd think that people causing this much of a stir would look more impressive. But they just look...ordinary, a bit tired and travel-weary. And fearful – I see some of Jesus' traveling companions casting their eyes around the gathering crowd. Probably on the lookout for an official, or a guard. Hard to remain inconspicuous when you keep gathering crowds like this.

Martha returns quickly, with Mary following, and most of the rest of the mourners, and what looks like the whole household trailing after them. They come closer and Mary sees Jesus, and falls down at his feet, her face streaked with fresh tears. And she says the same thing to Jesus that Martha did; “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Jesus places his hand on her head, gently, and then urges her to stand up. She stands, and he asks where Lazarus is buried. I guess it’s only fitting that he go and pay his respects, after he’s traveled all this way. Jesus motions to Mary and Martha, and he seems to notice...to really see... the lines of grief etched into their faces, the red eyes, the exhaustion, the tear-stained cheeks – he looks around at most of us, and hears the cries of lamentation coming from others in the crowd. He looks back to Mary and Martha, and I see tears begin to travel down Jesus’ cheeks, too. They all move off toward the tomb, and we follow behind, lifting up our cries of loss.

When we reach the tomb, Jesus stops for a moment, his grief still evident on his face. Perhaps I’ve been too harsh to judge him...the love he bears for his friends are easy to see in his tear-streaked face.

And then, he says the most extraordinary thing!

He tells us to roll the stone away from the tomb! Martha protests, saying “Lord, it has already been four days! There will be a stench!” But Jesus persists, saying that if we believed, we would still see the glory of God. He motions for them to remove the stone. Several of the men look unsettled...you can see it on their faces. “Does he mean me...am I to step forward and roll the stone away! Me?” After a moment, Martha seems to resign herself, and nods. Jesus motions again to the gathered crowd, and you can see the looks on people’s faces. “Not me,” they’re all thinking. I sure am – he doesn’t mean for me to step forward, surely. That’s a job for others – not for me. I am only here to watch, to mourn. Let Jesus roll the stone away himself! Why should we help?

Finally several men step forward to move the stone. I lean forward, unable to help myself. I’m not sure what I expect, exactly, but I can’t bear to miss it. Jesus then raises his voice, and says the most extraordinary thing – I don’t think I’ll ever forget it, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” And then, as we’re all turning that over, he raises his voice again, and says, “Lazarus, come out!” And I hear the crowd catch its collective breath. We all wait, squinting into the sun, shading our eyes to look toward the tomb. A few moments pass, and I strain my ears...I think I hear a shuffling, sliding. Something...and then we all fall back as a figure emerges from the tomb, feeling its halting way forward toward Jesus. It’s Lazarus – I know it. I know those wrappings...I was in the house when they washed and wrapped his body, when Martha gently

covered his face with the cloth for the last time. And now he's moving, walking toward Jesus. Martha and Mary fall to their feet, weeping, stretching out their hands toward their brother. We are all stunned, looking from one to another, seeing if we all see the same thing.

Jesus raises his voice again, points to Lazarus and says, "Unbind him, and let him go!" And we are all frozen to the spot. He can't mean us...mean for us to move forward and touch...that? We can't...I can't! I am here to mourn...to watch...I'm not prepared to be a part of this story! But I feel a tug in my heart, watching the man I knew as Lazarus reaching forward blindly, searching for Jesus, for us. I move forward, my steps hesitating at first, but then moving more swiftly. A few others move forward with me, and we are making quick work of it, uncovering his face, and unbinding his arms and legs so he can move freely. Martha and Mary fairly leap forward, and support him in their arms, Mary weeping and kissing his hair, and Martha, amazed, putting her hand to his cheek.

And I step back again, amazed at my boldness. I was just an onlooker...I didn't mean to get caught up in this...this miracle. For a miracle it must surely be. I see Lazarus, warm and alive, blinking and blinded by the bright light, being held by his sisters...a man who I know was dead, who I saw wrapped and put into a tomb. And I fall to my knees before Jesus, as do many.

I think that there are still dark days ahead. Even now, I see people slipping away, reporting to the Pharisees, no doubt. They will not be happy. An amazing event such as this will not go unnoticed.

But before, I did not believe, I did not understand...but now, how can my heart have room for doubt! I tell you, now, today – I have seen a man bound by death...and then freed to new life. I have seen a new beginning...for him, and for me.

I'm sure there are others who have not heard, who are trapped in the bondage of their own lives, wrapped in their own linen shroud - people who haven't heard the news, people who need to be set free. So I must go and tell them, just as I tell you now. A man is alive, who once was dead – what wonderful news! If this is possible, even now, in the midst of these dark times, then what amazing things God must have ahead for us all!

*Amen*