

Welcome to the 5th Sunday of Lent. We're getting close to the end! We have Palm Sunday next weekend and Holy Week festivities begin. Today, Lazarus is restored to life after FOUR days in a tomb. Let's look at how Jesus, as the SOURCE of new life, uses this moment to teach Martha and Mary, and all of us, how to become MORE fruitful through the resurrection of our spiritual lives.

First, a modern-day resurrection story. A friend of mine, we'll call him Sam, had a successful career as a sales manager and was married to a fiery Italian woman he loved deeply. The year he turned 51, his wife of 19 years, died of cystic fibrosis, and part of him died with her.

Christ has been present throughout Sam's life, he was a Protestant growing up, and then connected with the religious affiliations of the women in his life including Catholic, Southern Baptist, and Unity Christian. When his wife passed, he felt disconnected from God, and for a while, his life stopped bearing fruit.

Out of love, Sam quit his job and stayed with his wife for 3 1/2 years prior to her passing. He was thankful to be in a financial position to take time to care for her. When she passed away, he was a broken man, and paused his life to recover from this loss.

A few years passed, and he gained back his emotional strength. He continued his work-free lifestyle, though he was starting to drift and feeling a lack of purpose. He felt guilty, he was too young to retire and had solid skills, but was fearful and unsure on how to plug himself back into the work force.

Eventually, he was blessed to fall in love again and be married. Since his new wife was employed, he felt even more compelled to find work and contribute to the family income. However, his 12-year career gap made it hard to explain his circumstances to perspective employers. You could say Sam was like Lazarus, his career was in a tomb, and in the words of Martha, "Lord, by now there will be a stench;

But, as with Lazarus, the voice of Jesus entered the tomb. Sam joined a men's faith group and began to renew his personal relationship with Christ. He also found a faith-based accountability group for unemployed people, a group that prayed before and after each meeting. This is where I met Sam, a joyful and supportive person. His spirit was surprisingly upbeat, given the difficult circumstances of his life.

In 2021, after more than two years of searching, Sam landed a job selling solar and helping homeowners generate their own energy. Within a few months he was the top salesperson out of the 12 at his company. When we met for breakfast last week, he said he booked over a million dollars in sales last month. With God's help he found his way in the darkness. It started with faith and a willing spirit. St. Paul says, "You are not in the flesh; on the

contrary, you are in the spirit, if only the Spirit of God dwells in you." Every resurrection begins with faith as we allow the Holy Spirit into our hearts.

In the case of the raising of Lazarus, it's Martha who professes her faith to Jesus when he says, "I AM the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live." He asks her pointedly, "Do you believe this?" She answers, "Yes, Lord." WE need to give some thought to how EACH OF US answers this question. Lent is a great time to reflect on our personal relationship with Christ, and how our faith in his passion and resurrection give us strength and hope to take on the difficult circumstance in life.

We know from the story of Lazarus, that Christ has the power to overcome ANYTHING, even death, as long as we SURRENDER ourselves to him. He applies this power most often in SMALL ways to replace our dried-up branches with new ones. Lent is also a time to take inventory of our lives, and listen for the call to prune our branches and grow new ones.

We can start by thinking about the past challenges in our lives, like the ones Sam experienced, things that led to some form of death. Many of the words for these things, start with the letter "D," as "Death" does. For instance, "Disasters" and their aftermath lead to "disappointment," "disagreement," and "disgrace." They can leave us "disabled," "disgusted," and feeling "disowned." We can feel "down," in the "dark" and sometimes we even "disappear" from our relationships. I know what you're thinking, "Ok, Deacon Bill, this is getting a little DEPRESSING."

So, let's look at the flip side of the coin, at Jesus, THE RESURRECTION, a word that starts with "R," and see how he leads us out of the darkness, with other "R" words. Jesus "remembers" us. Since he created us, he can also "Recreate" us. He "restores" us and "reaffirms" us. And through his personal love for each of us we, like SAM we are, "reawakened," and "reassembled." We then "reappear" in his glory and are "recomissioned" to serve the Lord in his Kingdom. Now THIS is a reason to "RE-JOICE."

Often our recommissioning draws us into helping others who are trapped in the darkness of the tomb, like Lazarus and Sam. We see Jesus doesn't work alone, he engages the friends of Lazarus saying, "Take away the stone." And once Lazarus comes out, they are told, "Untie him and let him go." As a Church we are commissioned to MOVE STONES and UNTIE our brothers and sisters. We are called to serve with patience, humility, forgiveness, and all the qualities that Jesus modelled for us. Welcome to the 5th Sunday of Lent, a time to fortify our spirits and find new ways to reflect on and engage in the Death and Resurrection of our Lord and Savior.