

My dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

You could meditate on this Gospel passage of the raising of Lazarus for a life-time and never exhaust the riches to be found in it. First and foremost is that it reveals the emotional life of Jesus. John describes him as loving, weeping, troubled, and perturbed, which we'll examine in a minute.

Let's first focus our attention on the verses that speak of Jesus loving: "Master, the one you love is ill." And "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." We know from the Scriptures that Jesus visited their home, perhaps frequently, and dined there. We also know that if this is the same "Mary" "who had anointed the Lord with perfumed oil and dried his feet with her hair," as John attests, she was, at least in the eyes of the Pharisees, a woman of dubious reputation. But, Jesus, we're told, loved them.

In reflecting on His loving them how can you not consider the possibility that He loves you too? We don't know how old or how young they were. We know nothing of their economic status. We suspect that Mary had something of a bad reputation. But, He loved them, just as they were. Isn't that worthy of our consideration? Jesus loves you too, just as you are.

Isn't it interesting that the Lord didn't jump up and run to them as quickly as you might think He would if He loved them so much. Instead he lingered and it was only on the fourth day that Jesus went to them. Why did He linger?

The disciples apparently thought that since Bethany was on the road to Jerusalem where the enemies of Jesus were attempting to put Him to death, He didn't go out of fear of those who wanted to harm Him. But, the Lord explains and "said to them clearly, 'Lazarus has died. And I am glad for you that I was not there, that you may believe. Let us go to him'".

As I reflected on this dialogue, I recalled the sickness and dying of my own Mother. On May 20, 1966, she underwent surgery for what we were told was stomach ulcers. After 8 hours of nervous waiting for our anxious family, the doctor came to speak to us. He told us that our Mother had pancreatic cancer that had spread to all her internal organs and she would be dead within 3 months.

My father, sisters, and I were in shock. We had prayed and prayed, said rosary after rosary, and now this. I ran from the hospital screaming and crying and cursing God at the top of my lungs. "Where are you God when I need You, when she needs You!" "If you are a God, you are a useless God!"

For three months we watched my Mother deteriorate until she weighed less than 70 pounds. I carried her from bed to chair and back again in my arms. At the end she was hospitalized and as she lay dying I was praying once again. Only this time I prayed, "Lord set her free. Please take her home. Don't allow her to suffer anymore." She died on

August 15th, the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Mother, and I realized what an honor God had bestowed on her and us—that He took her home on the very day that we celebrate His calling His own Mother home. That evening I went to Church to celebrate the Feast and as I sat crying in front of the Blessed Mother’s statue all I could say was “Thank you, Lord! Thank you!”

As with his lingering in the case of Lazarus, “that you may believe,” so He lingered in the instance of my Mother’s dying, that I and my family may believe. (It’s worthy of noting, perhaps coincidental, probably not, that on May 20, 1972, six years to the day of my Mother’s surgery, I laid on the Cathedral floor and said my “Yes” to God and was ordained.) It’s important for us to realize that sometimes the Lord tarries a little when we’re faced with sickness or suffering or even death to give us the time we need to truly surrender our will to that of the Father.

Perhaps the most profound words in all the Bible are, “And Jesus wept.” When confronted with the anguish and the pain of those whom He loved, Jesus cried. John says he became “perturbed and deeply troubled.” The Greek word translated as “perturbed” describes deep, intense emotion. So when John tells us “And Jesus wept” he is not talking about a few tears rolling down his face. Rather, Jesus cried uncontrollably, with deep sobs and possible wailing—falling to his knees crying. Such was his pain for his friends, his sense of loss for Lazarus. Is it too much to imagine His crying so with us in our pain and suffering and loss? So often I cry when leaving the hospital after visiting the sick or visiting a grieving family at the loss of a loved one. I truly believe the Lord cries with me and with them in those moments.

For a moment let’s turn our attention to Lazarus dead in his grave. We don’t know what caused his death—an illness, long or short; a fall, an accident; whether it was peaceful or painful. But, all of a sudden in a darkness so long and so deep, he hears a voice, “Lazarus, come out!”

Finding himself on a cold stone slab, wrapped in all kinds of cloths filled with the scent of spices, he slowly gets up and makes his way out of the darkness into the light. How confused he must have been! Was I dead? How am I alive? Will I have to die again? Perhaps he thought twice before answering that call. Think about it. Sometimes it’s hard just to get off the couch, so perhaps we can imagine that leaving death and tomb behind was a difficult act of the will.

In our prayer, if we listen, we might hear the Lord calling us too to come out of our tombs. To come out of the tomb of our habits of sin, addiction, anxiety, despair. To come out of our tombs of loneliness, greed, drudgery, and lives devoid of meaning or substance. To come out of the tomb that forces us to live small and scared lives, hardly daring to wonder what

else might be available to us. To come out of the tomb of whatever keeps us from living a free, productive, joy-filled life.

Forgive me for going on so, but, as I said at the beginning, the spiritual riches of this Gospel encounter are seemingly inexhaustible. There is one last thing in the passage I would ask you to consider. It's absolutely fascinating!

Now Jesus had just raised Lazarus from the dead. He had the power! He had the power to do anything and everything, right? Why then does he direct the friends of Lazarus to "untie him and let him go"? He could certainly untie him Himself. But no! He calls on the community to untie him. That suggests to me what we are doing here. Why we are Church and how we are to be Church to one another.

It is the community who removes what binds us, who supports and sustains us when our will threatens to fail. Whatever tomb we dare to emerge from, there needs to be a community waiting to welcome us and accompany us on the road out of the darkness into the light. That is the Church! That needs to be our Church!

At our Easter Vigil this year we have three men who will be baptized and received into full communion in our Church. They witness to us the need for community; and not just the need, but the desirability, the attractiveness of our Catholic community, which perhaps we have too long taken for granted. During their scrutinies they testified to coming of their tombs of self-satisfaction, addictions, and soul-wounds inflicted by war and finding in our community of faith warmth, welcome, and comfort. Perhaps we're better than we think we are?

Finally, one more thought to ponder—what became of Lazarus in his life after death? He's never mentioned again in the Scriptures. How long did he live? What did he do? Did he fall back into the same, old hum-drum routine of his former life or did he follow Jesus more faithfully, exuberantly, joyfully, even to Calvary, and beyond into the glory of His Resurrection?

There really is no way of knowing. But we can know now; at least we can decide what we will do with the rest of our lives. We believe Jesus, in his suffering, dying, and rising, has called us out of whatever tombs we have been buried in. Will we choose to continue to lay on the cold stone slabs of indifference and lukewarm religion or will we choose to come into the light of his love and allow this community of faith to untie us and set us free to follow him more faithfully, more exuberantly, more joyfully for whatever time we have left. The choice is ours!