

March 29, 2020 10:00 a.m. Mother of Mercy Chapel

Fifth Sunday of Lent (Livestreamed)

For the second Sunday in a row, we are “celebrating Mass” virtually, an extraordinarily unusual way for us to “be together” while staying apart.

Unfortunately this extra-ordinary way of social interaction has quickly become the “new ordinary” during these days of enforced restrictions thru the Governor’s “Stay Home-Stay Safe” Executive Order.

So besides everything that family members are doing to keep themselves occupied and entertained at home, out of necessity we are finding creative ways to interact with others outside our homes by “working from home”, keeping up with school work, entertaining ourselves, and staying connected with friends (actual friends and electronic “friends”) thru all the wonderful technological means at our disposal---FaceTime, Zoom, Portal, Facebook, and something called “Tic Toc”---I have no idea what that is, but I understand that “everyone is doing it”.

So, it’s truly wonderful that we’re able to use this same technology continue “celebrating” and strengthening our Faith, by “livestreaming” our Mass, along with so many other opportunities to continue our religious education, to deepen our prayer life, to study the Scriptures, and to avail ourselves of Lenten

devotions and practices which help to keep us close to Jesus in this holy Season.

On this next to the last Sunday of Lent, the Scriptures call our attention to what we might say are the basics of our spiritual lives. We heard in today's Readings about Life---the precious gift that we all share; we heard about Sin, and the negative and hurtful impact that sin has in our lives and in the world; we heard about Death, the ultimate experience at the end of our human lives; we heard about the power of God's Spirit at work in our lives; and we heard about the extraordinary reality of rising to new life thru the power of God's Spirit in Jesus.

In these days as we live thru this world-wide pandemic----an experience none of us has ever known, and one that the world hasn't seen for centuries---in those moments when we're not trying to distract ourselves with electronic games and devices---we can't help but be focused on the basics of our human lives as well: life, health, sickness, and death.

We can't help but be affected by fear, both fear of what we know, and even more, by what we don't know.

Even though life is always like that---none of us can predict the future, and we never know what to expect----during times like this, that “reality” seems particularly harsh, and those basic human realities---life, sickness, and death---makes us feel a bit more fragile.

That’s why coming to Mass---even virtually----is SO important so that we can hear God’s Word, reflect on its meaning in our lives, and to celebrate the “extraordinary” lengths God has gone to “be with us” in our human realities.

Let’s keep in mind, however, that Lent ALWAYS focuses our attention on these basic human and spiritual realities of our lives.

Just think about how Lent always begins----by signing our foreheads with blessed Ashes, while saying: “Remember: you are dust! And unto dust, you will (someday) return!” That’s as realistic as it gets! And the alternate form of that same act of signing us with ashes equally gets to the heart of this reality: “Turn away from sin, and be faithful to the Gospel.”

And so, while there are fears, worries and anxieties that we’re experiencing in this pandemic, both because of what we know, and what we don’t know, as People of Faith we know, and profess our Faith in the Truth, that God is with us, that Jesus has conquered the power of sin and death, and that we have

every reason to be filled with Hope because we too share in the Victory Jesus has won.

And that's what all of the beautiful Scripture Readings we've just heard tell us in a variety of ways.

In today's beautiful and very long Gospel Reading about the raising of Lazarus from the dead, we know that Mary, Martha and Lazarus were dear friends of Jesus; it's clear that He would visit with them along His journeys from Galilee to Jerusalem, and back again. As St. John mentions, these 3 siblings lived in Bethany, just two miles from Jerusalem. So, this story was very personal for Jesus. Yet, when He got word from Mary and Martha that Lazarus had become ill, Jesus delayed going to visit; and when He finally did go, Lazarus had already died---in fact, he had been dead and buried for 4 days.

Both Martha and Mary tell Jesus that they were greatly disappointed that He hadn't come sooner. As they both said: "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" They clearly believed that Jesus could have, and would have, done something to cure Lazarus from his illness; now, it was too late.

The fact that St. John tells us that they both had that same lament implies that might be a very human reaction that most people would experience. Perhaps WE have found ourselves, in our anxious moments during these days, saying something similar to Jesus: “Jesus, if You had been here, maybe this pandemic wouldn’t have taken place; or maybe You could heal the world from it.”

But Jesus reminds us, as He did both Martha and Mary, that there was a much bigger matter at hand. Jesus IS here, and because He is with us, in His Word and in the Sacraments, we too can realize that what Jesus revealed next, both to Martha and to the world, is so much more important.

Jesus said: *“I AM the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in Me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die.”*

But then, Jesus said to her: *“Do you believe this?”*

That’s really the “64 million dollar” question, and one that each of us needs to answer for ourselves. Do YOU believe that Jesus IS the Resurrection and the Life?

If we do believe that Jesus IS the Resurrection and the Life, and that He is “the Christ”, the Son of God, then there are NO human fears, worries or anxieties that can defeat us, even a world-wide pandemic.

But Jesus did more than make revelations; He dramatically proved His point when He went to Lazarus’ tomb, where he had been dead for four days; so dead that Martha reminded Jesus that “*there will be a stench*”. And, after ordering them to take away the stone, and raising His eyes to Heaven and praying to His Heavenly Father, “*He cried out in a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out.’*” And out he came, and after Jesus commanded that he be untied and let go, Lazarus returned to the basics of human life.

However, we need to keep in mind that at some point in the future, he would face death---again.

What Jesus has promised US is even greater than what he did for Lazarus.

And that, dear Family of Faith, is what we have been preparing all Lent to celebrate----we are preparing to celebrate Easter.

Now, clearly, this year’s celebration of Easter will be far different than any Easter we’ve ever celebrated before. BUT, it’s still Easter, and we MUST

celebrate it with as much FAITH, JOY, ENTHUSIASM, and GRATITUDE as we can because what Jesus did when He rose from the dead changed the world forever; and it changed our lives as well.

That's what we hear reinforced in all the other Scripture Readings today as well.

We heard in today's First Reading from the Prophet Ezekiel that God Himself made this Promise: *I will open your graves and have you rise from them; I will put my Spirit in you that you may live. This is how you will know that I AM the Lord.*" And then, to make it even clearer, the Lord added: *"I have promised, and I will do it."*

That "promise" was fulfilled on Easter, when Jesus rose from the dead, and destroyed the power of death forever.

That's what St. Paul so emphatically stated in today's Second Reading in his Letter to the Romans: *"If the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you (and HE does thru the Sacrament of Baptism), the One who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also thru His Spirit dwelling in you."*

And what our Faith assures us is that when we live united with Jesus, we too share in that Victory over the power of the ultimate human and spiritual realities: sin and death.

As you probably know, Pope Francis offered a special time of Prayer for the world in this time of the pandemic on Friday of this week, and gave a special blessing to the whole world known as “Urbi et Orbi” (to the City and the World). It was eerie to see the Holy Father, in St. Peter’s massive Square, all alone---not a soul around because of the quarantine and lock down---praying for all people in the world for strength of Faith during this crisis.

As Pope Francis said: “The Lord reawakens our Easter Faith. By His cross we have been redeemed---He is our anchor; By His Cross we have been saved---He is our rudder; By His Cross we have been healed---He is our salvation. In the midst of this isolation...and the experience of the loss of so many things, let us once again listen to the proclamation that saves us: He is risen and is living by our side....Embracing His Cross means finding the courage to embrace all the hardships of the present time and to give us Hope.”

Yes, there’s no doubt that these are difficult, challenging, and extraordinary times. But, never forget that our God is with us; that the Spirit of God is within

us; and that Jesus, the Christ, IS the Resurrection and the Life. And, assuming that we join Martha in saying: “*Yes, Lord*” that we believe, then Jesus assures us that we too will never die.

God bless you!