

Homily at 9 am Mass, St Thomas Aquinas Church
March 26, 2023
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The last time we heard this gospel reading (John 11:1-45) was in March of 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic. Since then, there have been many deaths: 6.5 million worldwide and 1,000,000 in the United States from COVID 19.

There have been other deaths in our country as well. First, the casualties of gun violence, in 2022 there were 20,138 deaths from shootings (excluding suicides) and, in 2021, 20,726 deaths. In 2022, 332 people were shot in K-12 schools. Then there was the recent tragedy in Nashville, three children and three adults shot and killed. 1060 persons were shot and killed by police in 2022. In 2022, there were 648 mass shootings and 693 in 2021. (A mass shooting being defined as one in which four or more people were shot.) There are 71,600 licensed gun dealers in the United States, and, in 2022, 16.5 million guns were sold in this country. 18.8 million were sold in 2021.

Then, there are the deaths from fentanyl overdose, 71,238 deaths in 2021. In 2020, there were 45,979 suicides, 47,646 in 2021, in each of those years, close to 5,000 were teenagers. Then, there are the victims of domestic violence. Between July 1, 2020 and June 30, 2021, ninth-eight people were beaten to death by their spouse or partner. And, then, the victims of capital punishment, in 2021, eleven people were executed in this country. In all of the rest of the Americas there have been no executions in thirteen years.

And, there are other types of death as well. There is the catastrophic destruction of our ecosystem: the storms, the flooding, the heat waves and the deaths all this has caused, not only to human beings but also to the other sentient beings with whom we share this planet. And, the death of trust in revered systems and institutions; the sexual abuse scandal affects not only churches, but universities, schools, sports programs, prisons, and places of work as well. There is also the death of trust in our political system. There is so much anger and mistrust, and so many lies. And, there is death in our families through divorce, addiction and lack of communication.

With so much dying there can be despair and a loss of hope. But, into the tomb of despair whose stench has numbed us, Jesus says, "Come out." It is at once command and a plea. I like to think Lazarus didn't have to come out. He could have said, "I smell too much; it's cool in the tomb, and I'm resting comfortably." Or, he could have said, "I don't want to go back to living with my sisters, to work, to the drudgery of daily living; I prefer the tomb." With so much death around us, will we stay with the stench, but also, with the comfort of the tomb?

In John's gospel, Jesus usually requires cooperation for his miracles. In today's gospel he asks for belief from Martha. "Do you believe this?" he asks her. She replies, "Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that you are the Christ the Son of the living God who has come into the world." A second time he emphasizes the need of faith to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?" He also requires cooperation from the mourners, they are told to "Take away the stone," and to untie Lazarus. Finally, Jesus requires cooperation from Lazarus; he has to walk out.

This is not the case with the two other occasions where Jesus raises someone from the dead in the gospels of Mark and Matthew and in the gospel of Luke. Mark and Matthew tell the story of the synagogue leader (identified as Jairus in Mark) whose daughter has died. Jesus simply takes her by the hand and brings her back to life, neither she nor her parents are required to do anything (Matthew 9:18-26 and Mark 5:21-24, 35-42). Luke tells the story of the son of the widow of Naim (Luke 7:11-15). Again, no one is required to do anything. Jesus simply tells the young man to get up.

But, in John's gospel, Jesus requires cooperation. Remember the blind man from last week's gospel (John 9:1-41). He had to go to the pool at Siloam, a hefty downhill walk from the temple area. His parents probably had to help him get there. Jesus made a paste from mud and placed it on his eyes and told him to go wash. Had he not gone he probably would have stayed blind with caked mud on his eyes. And, in today's gospel reading, for Jesus' greatest miracle, he requires cooperation.

Today, for the miracles we so desperately need, Jesus requires cooperation; not despair but commitment; not loss of hope but cooperation. Whatever miracle we need, we need to cooperate. We cannot just stand there doing nothing, expecting God to act.

Yes, we are surrounded by death: death on our planet that we call pollution and global warming, death among nations that we call war, death in our country that we call anger and shootings, death in our families that we call domestic violence and divorce, death within ourselves that we call depression and addiction and sin. But we are here to affirm life, to affirm hope; because we, like Martha, believe in the resurrection; because we, like the mourners, will take away the stone and strive to untie those who are bound; because, like Lazarus, we will not stay in the comfort of the tomb. We will come out when we hear those words, "Lazarus come forth!"