

5th Sunday of Lent

Cycle A, 4.2.17

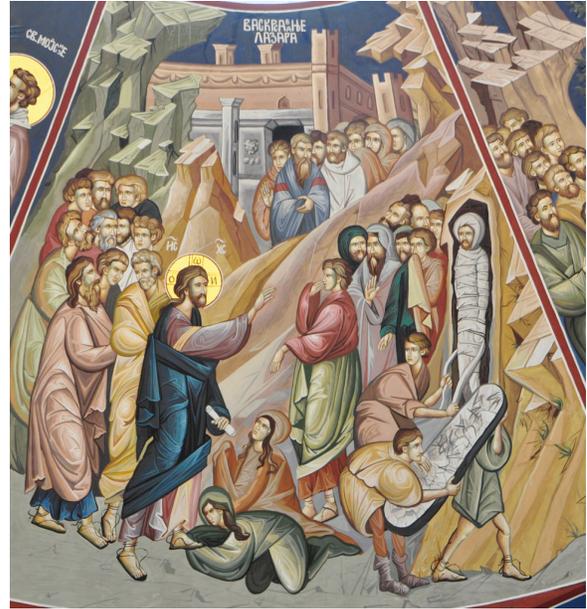
Ezekiel 37:12-14/Romans 8:8-11

John 11:1-45

CHOOSE THE “ALL-IN” MEMBERSHIP LEVEL

Over the past three weeks of Lent the gospel of John has been inviting us, step by step, into a deeper and more profound experience of faith. With the Samaritan woman at the well, we were invited to come to Jesus as if for the first time. There, in the heat of the noonday sun at the center of town, we encountered a man who knew us better than we know ourselves. He knew our weaknesses and failings, he understood our doubts and our uncertainties, and, in spite of that or perhaps because of that, he invited us to drink deeply, not water from the well, but springs of living water, welling up from the heart of God, who loves us and accepts us. We thought we knew everything, all the rights answers, followed all the rules, but we were caught short in the presence of Jesus as he looked into our hearts. He was more than a prophet; he is the Anointed One sent by God. He is the Christ. Even better – we went home and told others about this man we encountered and brought them to Jesus.

Last week we stood in amazement with the man who had been blind from birth, as Jesus put a mudpack on our eyes and, to the bewilderment of parents and the authorities of the Law, restored our sight. We could look at the world around us with new eyes and we could see, as if for the first time, the glory of God shining on the face of Jesus. We learned that it is only through tribulation and testing that we come to full faith and enlightenment. While all those around us were suspicious and even hostile to Jesus, when he asked us if we believe in the Son of Man, we answered simply yet profoundly: *I do believe, Lord!* and we worshipped him.



And today we confront the greatest challenge yet. In the face of death and utter hopelessness, we are invited to trust in the One who raises our brother Lazarus from the tomb. In four powerful scenes today’s drama unfolds before us. We watch as those around us seem to almost thwart who Jesus is and what He came to do. The disciples are fearful: *Don’t go there, Lord. They’re going to hurt you. They’re out to get you.* Martha is filled with grief that cannot be overcome even by Jesus: *I know my brother will rise again, but that won’t happen now, not until that final resurrection in the last age.* And Mary, protesting through her tears, doesn’t want them to follow Jesus’ instruction: *Oh, you can’t roll the stone away; the stench will be great because death has already taken its toll.* Only when Lazarus is seen alive again, emerging from the tomb, do some of the onlookers begin to believe. Then is the prophecy of Ezekiel fulfilled: *When I open your graves and have you rise from them, O my people! I will put my spirit in you that you may live, and I will settle you upon your land; thus you shall know that I am the Lord.*

Three Sundays of powerful stories. A cast of many characters in each drama. Each with a different kind of faith, a variety of depths of understanding – those who are incredulous, those who are not fully convinced, those whose faith is there but inadequate, those who want to believe but still wrestle with so many doubts, those who need proof in order to believe, those who find delight in the “something new” that Jesus has done for them. Those for whom faith doesn’t matter because nothing seems to change in their lives. Some come to Jesus on the grounds that it can do no harm and might make them feel better. Others will come to him aware that, despite material appearances, their lives are a mess, perhaps too much of a mess to have hope. Those who go back and forth, sincerely searching and eagerly anticipating something great, Someone wonderful.

To all of them – to all of us – Jesus extends the invitation: *Drink from the spring of life-giving water! Open your eyes and look around! Come out of that tomb into the light of day, into Life – into the Life of the Spirit!*



Many organizations to which we belong have different levels of membership. “Planet Fitness,” one of the newest fitness club chains throughout the country, has a basic \$10/month membership. At that level you get to work out in a comfortable ‘Judgment Free’ Zone. Every member gets

to take part in Pizza Mondays and Bagel Tuesdays. You have access to the club anytime it's open. And you get to ask the staff for help with whatever you need. Plus, they'll also throw in a "hi" and a "goodbye" for free. If you opt for the “Black Card” membership at \$19.99/month, you get the free T-shirt and use of the gym, but also a lot of extras – reciprocal use of all their locations, unlimited time in the massage chair, use of tanning facilities, ½ price on cooler drinks.

There are all kinds and models of memberships in various clubs and organizations. The most complete is the “all-in membership” that gives you access to everything straight away. Now I wouldn’t compare our Church or our faith to membership in a club – even though we desperately need you to pay your dues. But I think Jesus calls us to that “all-in” membership. These Lenten gospels from John are not only intended for those who are going to be baptized and confirmed at the Easter Vigil. The stories are given to all of us as a time to renew our baptismal commitment. Most of us who call ourselves Christian were baptized as infants; our parents and godparents professed our faith for us. But there is no way that we can escape making a believing commitment of our own, especially once we begin to realize what being a Christian costs, and how much easier it is not to take church and religion too seriously.

Even then, a commitment made sincerely at one time of life may be threatened when we run up against an unexpected obstacle. So all the characters we’ve been encountering through these Lenten gospels are reflections of ourselves. Each of us at a different stage of life, a different phase of our relationship with God, a different level of belonging. The community of disciples includes all of us as we can clearly see in the gospels.

They are a mirror of our own faith and understanding. So we ask God to help us be faithful disciples. If we're struggling with faith and doubting whether we should believe, let's ask God to overcome our obstacles. If we believe, let's ask God to strengthen our faith when it's tested by the difficulties of life. And as we face that final specter of death, may God grant us the grace to see that we already possess life in God that death cannot touch.



I've always been inspired by Maya Angelou, the great African-American poet, author and civil rights leader. She was a woman of deep faith, but also brutal honesty. In her book of essays: Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now, she wrote: *My faith is tested many times every day, and more times than I'd like to confess, I'm unable to keep the banner of faith aloft. If a promise is not kept, or if a secret is betrayed, or if I experience long-lasting pain, I begin to doubt God and God's love. I fall so miserably into the chasm of disbelief that I cry out in despair. Then the Spirit lifts me up again, and once more I am secured in faith. I don't know how that happens, save when I cry out earnestly I am answered immediately and am returned to faithfulness. I am once again filled with Spirit and firmly planted on solid ground.* May that Holy Spirit lift you and me up as we prepare to renew our baptismal commitment at Easter.

Fr. John Kasper, OSFS