

Sermon. Fifth Sunday of Lent. Third Sunday after Lockdown. March 27th 2020.

Romans 8:5-28, John 11:1-45

How are you doing? How has this week been for you? For some of us, we maybe thought we may be disrupted only until Easter, maybe a little longer, then everything back to normal. And now, here in the Netherlands, it is now until the start of June, all for good and important reasons which we should follow. I guess, some of us are now settling into this new rhythm, maybe jobs around the house have been done after perhaps years of inaction and prodding by our wives. Maybe we feel stress and anxiety growing. This is a time of loving each other as believers, helping where possible to carry each others burdens, and where you feel the stress or anxiety growing ... please share with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Let someone know.

Our main scripture for today. John 11. The Seventh Sign in the gospel – the miracles in John are called signs. An incredible one – only recorded in this gospel, nowhere else. With three words – Lazarus, come out! – a man who has been dead for 4 days, comes alive and comes stumbling out of the tomb wrapped in his grave clothes. Being so close to Holy Week and Easter, already it reminds us of the One who will be raised by the Spirit, who leaves his grave clothes behind, an exit no one sees.

‘I am the resurrection and the life, the one who believes in me, will live even though they die. Jesus declares.

Faith is a theme running in our passage. Jesus says – ‘the one who believes in me’. To believe in Jesus – is to place our trust in him, who he is, what he has done and what he said. An image could be – imagine he is knocking at the door of your house – that may be hard in these days of social distancing – and you invite him in. To

invite him in, is to want someone to be there. To invite Jesus into your life to be the new gravity within you.

Faith in Jesus he says, gives assurance. When death is faced – and death is something many people fear – when death is drawing close, Jesus gives the assurance, that the believer will rise again – rise to life – after death, when he returns. As he said: ‘The one who believes in me, will live even though they die.

But Jesus offers life in this life. He also said ‘I am the resurrection and the life... whoever lives by believing in me will never die.’ The believer in Jesus is already living – those who believe in him possess eternal life *here and now* and it continues on beyond and through death.

So. We enjoy eternal life now – a present continuing possession which can’t be taken away. A promise of the recovery of life after death of the body – at the time of his return. Belief in Jesus is about life – and life is the gift of Jesus offered to us. I am the resurrection and the life ... do you believe this? he asks Martha.

Martha says: I believe you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world. Martha says the words, that John the writer says, is what his whole book is about: John 20:31 - ‘... These are written that you – the reader, the listener as the gospel was sent out read out – that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.’ Martha declares Jesus is God’s promised king – the one God promised to send – the Christ.

It isn’t only Martha’s faith Jesus looks to, but the faith of his disciples – when he shares that Lazarus has died, he says through this miracle, ‘so that you may believe’. His desire that his disciples grow further in their faith. And the faith of those crowds, mourners

as the stone is rolled away: in his prayer he says 'I knew you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.' In these weeks now ahead of us, how can you grow in faith? To grow in loving God?

Yet there are so many questions. Questions those of us who have faith in Christ, face or struggle with. Show in the story. Jesus – who we know has an incredible ministry of healing, demons being cast out and so on. Jesus hears that Lazarus is ill. The message is clearly an invite – you may call that prayer today – to do something, to intervene. He says God will be glorified. **Yet** he stays where he is, for two days. Distance was not a problem for Jesus. In a previous sign – John 4 – a royal official comes to him. Asks him heal his son who is close to death. Jesus says – 'Go, your son will live' – and the man took Jesus at his word, left and when he got home the son was healed. Jesus could have said the same to the messenger about Lazarus. It is even more hard because this royal official, he probably had never met. It says – Jesus loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus. But no response.

The crowds say later, when Jesus is walking to the tomb and he weeps, 'See how he loved him.' Jesus love is not in doubt. But then the crowds say what is in our minds, and in our minds when prayers are not being answered, when loved ones are sick with illness – now or in the past – 'could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man, have kept this man from dying.' We think – can not the one who acted in the past act now, or how we prayed for that person and they recovered or were healed quickly, and yet not this time. We will all face this question and we need to find a place for it in our faith or else it becomes something that erodes our faith in prayer.

Jesus gives no reasons when he arrives, to Martha and Mary. Martha says 'if you had been here, my brother would not have

died...’ Mary says the same words later. You can imagine – like we do with the death of a loved one – we talk about every detail, we talk over, we remember good things, we see care, and we see lack of care. They had both come to the same conclusion. If you had been here, my brother would not have died. Maybe you could say they are disappointed with Jesus. That is a harsh word to say Grant, but maybe for some of us, we need to be honest – I am disappointed with you Jesus. I prayed. I hoped and it didn’t happen. Maybe for some people we need to say it in prayer – because it is the word in our heart. He knows it is there.

It is a harsh word. The ones he loved, say that to him. We too are loved – we know those tremendous words, that strength us in these days of coronavirus crisis– nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Yet Jesus does not rebuke them for saying it to him. He accepts it. Like later, he will accept the words of praise from Thomas – my Lord and God; he accepts these words of challenge and pain and disappointment. It gives me hope. The psalms have some pretty direct language to God, honest words, for example, before it was on the lips of Jesus, David prayed – my god my god why have you forsaken me. We **can bring** such words to him.

He cares at the pain we face or have endured. His tears at the pain of Mary and all who grieved. His loving heart to us at our suffering. He cares about this world. We see v33 – “he was deeply moved” The Greek says he was indignant in the spirit. The Greek is ‘en-brimo’ which is used to describe horses, snorting in the nostrils. When it is used elsewhere, in NT, it is about anger, indignation, someone being rebuked. Who or what is he angry at? It is not the people around him. It is not at their grief. It is not that they do not expect God to do a miracle. I’d suggest, he is angry at how this world is – angry at the sickness and death in this world. , that causes so much pain to those close to him. Angry, perhaps at the

one from whom it came, the devil, the one whose power, as Hebrews 2 says, he came to destroy. John began his book with said: Through him all things were made, without him nothing has been made that was made.' Jesus – God among us – the Word made Flesh – knew what this world was meant to be – no sickness, no coronavirus, no cancer, no violence, no evil. His anger I feel – this was not how it was meant to be.

Perhaps Holy Week can help us in our questions. Jesus says – 'Father I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me.' Not all Jesus prayers were answered as he hoped. On Maundy Thursday he prays for the unity of the church, in John 17. Yet that prayer – by the Lord – is still being worked out – it has not been answered yet... In the Garden of Gethsemane, he prays 'Abba Father, Everything is possible for you, take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.' He cries out like – we are able to cry out Abba Father as Paul reminds us – he desires one thing, take this cup, yet submits to the will of the father, which is different than he desires. On the Cross, he prays – Eloi Eloi lama sabachtani – my God my God have you forsaken me. Heaven is silent. There is no voice from heaven like on the mount of transfiguration, not dove from heaven like at his baptism. Then on Easter Eve, when disciples are fearful, confused, heartbroken, thinking it has all ended, that the Christ was crucified. There is no intervention by God – no angel sent as in the days of the Old Testament, no vision, that it is all okay. Then Easter Sunday. Resurrection. The stone rolled away. The tomb is empty. The grave clothes taken off. Yet for some, only at the end of that glorious day, after walking away on a road, or gathering in an upper room, do they know it is okay. Somehow God was working out a plan which they would spend the rest of their lives talking about and being willing to die for to share with others. Only when they came to Easter, did they look back and understand more about the past days.

Maybe again it is that quote we heard last week: 'We can only 'make sense' of a dark world or dark events only believing in the One who came to be the light of the world.' The Light we can trust in, pour out our hearts to, who cares for and loves us. Amen.

Father, help me to live this day and this week to the full,
Being true to you, in every way.

Jesus, help me to give myself away to others, being kind and loving
to everyone I meet.

Spirit, help me to love my town, proclaiming Christ in all I do and
say. Amen.