

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT – YEAR A

THE TOMB: A WOMB, NO LONGER A GRAVE

Introduction

‘When the gods formed mankind, they attributed death to humanity and withhold life in their hands.’ In the famous Mesopotamian epic, these are the words that the tavern-keeper, Siduri, addressed Gilgamesh, who is in desperate search of the tree of life. Dejected, the hero realizes that he must resign: to die is to leave for the ‘land of no return.’ Darkness, silence, and oblivion wrap the abode of the dead in the Jewish conception. In the Old Testament, it is hard to find any hint of the soul’s immortality or the resurrection of the dead. The following texts are obviously not written prior to the second century B.C.



Job said: *“There is hope for a tree: if cut down it will sprout again; its new shoots will still appear. But when man is cut down, he comes undone: he breathes his last—where will he be? The waters of the sea may disappear, rivers drain away, but the one who lies down will not rise again; the heavens will vanish before he wakes, before he rises from his sleep”* (Job 14:7-12). His dejection flowed in an elegy on the mouth of the Psalmist: *“You allow me to live but a short span; before you, all my years are nothing. Human existence is a mere whiff of breath. Turn from me awhile, that I may find relief before I depart and be no more”* (Ps 39:6,14).

So the more enlightened spirit of antiquity expressed bewilderment, anguish, and loss in front of the transience of life. The Bible has preserved the memory of disorientation and concern to

remind us how dense the tomb's darkness was before the light of Easter shone on the world.

To internalize the message, we repeat: *“Although I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you, O Lord of life, are beside me.”*

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First Reading: Ezekiel 37:12-14

Thus says the Lord God: O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them, and bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the Lord, 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. I have promised, and I will do it, says the Lord.

Among the Israelites of the Babylonian Exile in 597 B.C. is a priest named Ezekiel. He is destined to become the prophet of the people in exile. *“On the fifth day of the tenth month in the eleventh year of our exile, a fugitive arrived from Jerusalem to tell me: The city has fallen.”* (Ezk 33:21). Four months earlier, the soldiers of Nebuchadnezzar had taken it and set it on fire. They captured a new group of prisoners, more numerous than the last, destined to swell the ranks of what was already in Mesopotamia. Ezekiel carries on his activity as a prophet among these defeated and dejected exiles who kept repeating: *“Our bones are dry, hope has gone, it is the end of us”* (Ezk 37:11). They feel like corpses, even worse, withered, corroded skeletons, worn by many years in the tomb of exile.

Is it all over then? Have the blessings given to Abraham been rendered useless by the sin of the people? Indeed, no one can give life back to Israel. It is reduced to a vast expanse of dry bones scattered across the plains and valleys of the country of the two rivers (Ezk 37:1-3).

Ezekiel announces the unprecedented miracle the Lord is about to perform in this historical context: God will restore life to those dry bones. The Israelites will rise again to new life. The Lord will open the graves where they were placed, bring them out of their graves, and lead them back to their land (vv. 12-13).

This prophecy did not refer to the resurrection of the dead, as we understand it, but to the return to the homeland of the exiles. However, in subsequent centuries, it was the object of study and reflection on the part of the rabbis. It acquired great importance and contributed to the blooming of the idea that, in the coming of the Messiah, all the righteous would come back to life to share in the joy of the new kingdom.

The spirit of the Lord enters everywhere, and there, life arrives. It happened at the beginning of the world when God, *“having formed man from the dust of the earth, breathed into his nostrils*

the breath of life and man became a living being” (Gen 2:7). This spirit of life continues to operate in any death situation: that of hatred, uncivilized resentment among people, misunderstanding and family disagreements, divisions in the community. There is nothing irrecoverable for the spirit of the Lord. He can rebuild and restore life even to dry bones.

Second Reading: Romans 8:8-11

Brothers and sisters: Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh; on the contrary, you are in the spirit, if only the Spirit of God dwells in you. Whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the spirit is alive because of righteousness. If the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the One who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit dwelling in you.

All people die. The biological life they have in common with animals does not last forever. Even Jesus, being a man like us, is dead, had to die. But he is risen. Why does this happen? What made him rise?

In today’s reading, Paul responds. He possessed the fullness of the Spirit of God; that is, he had in himself the life of God that cannot die. Human life has a beginning and an end, but God has none. He is not born, and he does not die. Jesus had in himself this divine life. When this material life of his ends one day, the Spirit of God will raise him and bring him in the glory of the Father.

Paul continues that even we, who have received baptism in his own Spirit, his own life, can no longer die. Our life in this world will end, but it will not be the end of everything. The Spirit who raised Jesus and who lives in us will give eternal life to our mortal bodies.

Gospel: John 11:1-45

Now a man was ill, Lazarus from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who had anointed the Lord with perfumed oil and dried his feet with her hair; it was her brother Lazarus who was ill. So the sisters sent word to Jesus saying, “Master, the one you love is ill.” When Jesus heard this he said, “This illness is not to end in death, but is for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that he was ill, he remained for two days in the place where he was. Then after this he said to his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.” The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just trying to stone you, and you want to go back there?” Jesus

answered, “Are there not twelve hours in a day? If one walks during the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if one walks at night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.” He said this, and then told them, “Our friend Lazarus is asleep, but I am going to awaken him.” So the disciples said to him, “Master, if he is asleep, he will be saved.” But Jesus was talking about his death, while they thought that he meant ordinary sleep. So then Jesus 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.” So Thomas, called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go to die with him.”

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, only about two miles away. And many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him; but Mary sat at home. Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise.” Martha said to him, “I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus told her, “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. Do you believe this?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world.”

When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary secretly, saying, “The teacher is here and is asking for you.” As soon as she heard this, she rose quickly and went to him. For Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still where Martha had met him. So when the Jews who were with her in the house comforting her saw Mary get up quickly and go out, they followed her, presuming that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come with her weeping, he became perturbed and deeply troubled, and said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Sir, come and see.” And Jesus wept. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him.” But some of them said, “Could not the one who opened the eyes of the blind man have done something so that this man would not have died?”

So Jesus, perturbed again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay across it. Jesus said “Take away the stone.” Martha, the dead man’s sister, said to him, “Lord, by now there will be a stench; he has been dead for four days.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. And Jesus raised his eyes and said, “Father, I thank you for hearing me. I know that you always hear me; but because of the crowd here I have said this, that they may believe that you sent me.” And when he had said this, he cried out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, tied hand and foot with burial bands, and his face was wrapped in a cloth. So Jesus said to them, “Untie him and let him go.”

Now many of the Jews who had come to Mary and seen what he had done began to believe in

him.

Lazarus's resuscitation story is quite long, but the part dedicated to the miracle is extremely short, only two verses (vv. 43-44). The rest consists of a series of dialogues that aim to lead the reader into a deeper level of the text where the true meaning of the sign performed by Jesus can be captured.

I mentioned the resuscitation of Lazarus, not his resurrection, because to return to this world, to restore this material life, is still marked by death. To leave this life definitively, as it happened to Jesus on Easter, to be introduced in the world of God where death, any kind of death, has no more access, is another thing. Going back to this material world is to resuscitate, but to go beyond this material world, into the world of God, is to resurrect.

Having clarified this, let us approach the passage. If Lazarus' death appeared in a newspaper with strict fidelity, we would detect inconsistencies and unlikely details because this is not a historical account but a theology page. However, in the Gospel of John, there are precious indexes that guide us toward the theological message of the story. I will try to enumerate them:

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- [REDACTED] k,
- [REDACTED] "Lazarus is dead and I'm glad I was not there" (v. 15), how can he rejoice at not having prevented the death of his friend?

Another difficulty: there were no telephones; how did Martha hear that Jesus was coming (v. 17)? And, while she calls Mary (v. 28), what does Jesus do while still on the road? Why wait for Mary to come out from Bethany and go to him? We would not have behaved in this way: we would have proceeded directly to the deceased's house to offer our condolences.

In vv. 25-26, we are faced with a statement of Jesus, which is difficult to interpret: "*Whoever believes in me, though he dies, shall live. Whoever lives and believes in me will never die.*"

How can he promise that his disciple will never die when we realize that Christians die like everyone else? What does he mean?

In verse 35, it is said that Jesus weeps over the death of his friend. How could he when he already knows that he will resurrect him? Is he pretending?

– Finally, the family of Bethany disappears without leaving any trace in the Gospel of John and does not appear again throughout the New Testament. What happened to these three people so

dear to Jesus?

Strangely, such an amazing miracle is not mentioned by the other evangelists. These details are certainly signs that John wanted to offer his readers not a cold, factual account but an intensive piece of theology. Taking a cue from healing that had aroused quite an impression because the sick person was presumed to be dead, the evangelist has addressed the central theme of the Christian message: Jesus, the Risen One, is the Lord of life.

Let's start with the meaning that John intends to give to the family of Bethany, consisting only of a brother and sisters. It represents the Christian community where there are no superiors or inferiors, only brothers and sisters. An intense affective atmosphere unites these people to Jesus. The evangelist places considerable emphasis on the friendship between the Master and Lazarus (vv. 3,5,11,36). It is the symbol of the deep bond between Jesus and every disciple: "*I do not call you servants—he will tell at the Last Supper but I have called you friends*" (Jn 15:15).

In this community, an incident that rattles occurs. It confronts an insoluble enigma: the death of a brother. What is Jesus' answer to the disciple who asked him if this tragic event may have a meaning? Whoever loves a good friend will not let him die. If he was a friend of Lazarus and ours, why doesn't he prevent his death?

Like Mary and Martha, we also do not understand why he 'let two days go by.' As a sign of affection for the friend, we would have expected him to intervene immediately. The veiled complaint made by the two sisters could also be ours: "*If you had been here, Lord, our brother would not have died*" (vv. 21,32). The death of a loved one, our death, puts faith to the test. It arouses the suspicion that he is 'not here' that he does not accompany us with his love.

By allowing Lazarus to die, Jesus responds to these questions: it is not his intention to prevent biological death. He does not want to interfere in the natural course of life. He has not come to make this form of life eternal but introduces us to that which has no end. The life of this world is destined to end, and it is good that it should be so.

In this perspective, we should reconsider the validity of the relationship that many Christians have established with Christ and religion. When this is reduced to the pressing demands of miracles, it inevitably results in a crisis of faith and the doubt that 'he is not here' where we would expect him to be, where we need him most, in sickness, sorrow and misfortune. The dialogue with the disciples (vv. 7-16) aids the evangelist in expressing our uncertainty and fear in the face of death. It is the reaction of humans fearing death marks the end of everything. Fear is the most insidious enemy of the disciple. Whoever fears death cannot live as a Christian. To be a disciple means to accept the loss of life, even to give it for love, dying like the grain of wheat that falls to the earth and produces much fruit (Jn 12:24-28).

In the words of Jesus, death is presented in its proper perspective. He claims to be happy not to

have prevented his friend Lazarus from dying (v. 15) because for him, death is not a destructive, irreparable event but marks the beginning of a condition infinitely better than what went before.

We thus come to the central part of the passage, the dialogue with Martha (vv. 17-27).

Lazarus has already been in the tomb for four days. It was believed that during the first three days, the person was not yet undoubtedly dead. Life would permanently leave him only on the fourth day. John does not want to inform us of the exact date of Lazarus' death. He only wants us to know that Lazarus was dead and nothing more. The necessary premise to the question he wants to answer is: What can Jesus do for one who is undoubtedly dead?

In the dialogue that follows, Jesus leads Martha to understand the significance of the death of a disciple (a brother or a sister of the Christian community).

'If you had been here' is a human proclamation of surrender in front of an event that surpasses him, which makes a mockery of his efforts to dismiss it. Death also leads us to doubt God's presence. If God exists, why is there death? Martha belongs to the group of those who, unlike the Sadducees, believe in the resurrection of the dead. She is convinced that, at the end of the world, her brother Lazarus will return to life together with all the righteous and will take part in the Kingdom of God.

This is her way of understanding the resurrection (perhaps similar to many Christians today) that does not console anyone. It is too far away and does not make any sense. Why would God let anyone die only to bring them back to life again? Why make them wait that long? How can the soul be without the body? Finally, a similar type of resurrection is less credible. If a person dies, God can undoubtedly recreate him, but, in such a case, it would be a clone, not the same person as before.

The Christian does not believe in a death and a resurrection that will take place at the end of the world. Instead, he believes that the person redeemed by Christ does not die. Let us try to understand this new and extraordinary message that Jesus announces to Martha. He says: "*Whoever believes in me will never die*" (v. 26). What does this mean? How can a person that we see expire and become a corpse not die? To explain this, there is a need to resort to comparisons.

Exits and entrances characterize our whole existence. We go out from nowhere and enter into the womb of our mother. Once gestation is completed, we leave to enter this world characterized by many signs of death. Loneliness, abandonment, distance, betrayal, ignorance, disease, and pain are forms of death. Our life here is never complete. It is always subject to limitations. This cannot be the final world, our ultimate destiny. To live fully and without death, we must get away from the limits of this world.

Let us suppose that in the womb of a mother there are twins. They can see, understand and speak to each other during the nine-month of gestation period. However, they only know their little world and cannot imagine what life is like outside. They do not know that people marry, work and travel. They have no idea that there are animals, plants, flowers, beaches. The only thing they know is the life they have inside the womb.

After nine months, the twins are born. The one who was born a few seconds after the first and remained even for a short time longer in the womb of the mother would certainly think: 'My twin is dead. He is not here anymore. He disappeared and left me ...' and he cries. But the brother is not dead. He only moved from a restricted, short, limited life to enter into another form of life.

Jesus says to Martha that the disciple does not experience death but is born to a new form of life. He enters the world of God, takes part in a life that is no longer subject to limits and death, as happens on earth. It is a life without end. We cannot say more because, if we describe it, we would just be projecting on the form of this life. It remains a surprise, and God keeps it to himself: "*Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it dawned on the mind what God has prepared for those who love him*" (1 Cor 2:9). Therefore, in the Christian perspective, life in this world is a gestation period, and death is verified by those who remain, not those who depart.

At this point, we can understand why Jesus is pleased with not having prevented the death of Lazarus. He sees it with God's sight: the most important and the happiest moment for a human being. Rightly, the early Christians called what other people called the fateful day in which they plunge into nothingness, the 'day of birth.' The judgment of Lao-Tze is known: 'That which for the caterpillar is the end of the world, for the rest of the world is a butterfly.' The caterpillar does not die; it disappears as a caterpillar but continues to live as a butterfly. It is another image that helps us to understand the victory of Christ over death.

After listening to the words of Jesus, Martha pronounces a significant profession of faith. First, she acknowledges that Jesus is the one who gives this life: "*Yes, Lord, I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world*" (v. 27).

We will not dwell on the dialogue between Jesus and Mary (vv. 28-33) because it adds nothing to what has already been said. We only note that Jesus does not enter Bethany, where the Jews console the sisters. He does not go to extend condolences but to give life. He wants Mary to leave the house where everyone is crying. His quiver—*he was moved and troubled*—also shows how he feels deeply, like any person, the drama of death.

The final scene is important (vv. 34-42). It opens with the weeping of Jesus. The Christian who does not believe cannot say that death is none other than a birth. However, he is not insensitive and sheds a tear when a friend leaves him. He knows that he is not dead and is happy that he is living with God. However, he is sad because for a time, he will be separated from him.

There are but two ways of weeping. Someone convinced that, with death, it is all over, is inconsolable at the indignity of it. The other is that of Jesus, who cannot hold back his tears in front of the tomb. These two forms of crying are expressed in the Greek text with two different verbs. For Mary, Martha and the Jews, ‘*klaiein*’ (v. 33) is used. It indicates that gestures of despair accompany the crying. With Jesus, it is ‘*edakrusen*,’ which means “*tears began trickling from his eyes*” (v. 35). Only this serene and dignified weeping is Christian.

Weeping is followed by an order: “*Take away the stone!*” It is addressed to the Christian community and all those who still think the world of the dead is cut off from and has no communication with that of the living. Anyone who believes in the Risen Lord knows that all are alive, even though partakers of two different forms of life. All barriers are torn down; all the stones were removed on Easter; now, everyone goes from one world to another without dying. The prayer that Jesus addressed to the Father (vv. 41-42) is not a request for a miracle but light for the people around him. He asks that everyone understand the sign's deep meaning that he will perform and that they come to believe in him, the Lord of life.

The cry, “*Lazarus, come out!*” is the fulfillment of his prophecy: “*Truly, the hour is coming when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and on hearing it, will live. All those lying in the tomb will hear his voice and come out*” (John 5:25-29). In fact, ‘the dead,’ with all the signs that characterized his condition, “*his hands and feet were bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped in a cloth*” (v. 44), comes out. ‘The dead,’—says the text. Yes, because it is with the dead, with one who remains definitely dead (four days in the tomb) that Jesus shows his vivifying power: not bringing him back to life on earth (this would be a short-lived victory, not definitely to death), but bringing it with him in the glory of God.

“*Untie him and let him go*” (v. 44)—he finally orders. The invitation is addressed to the brothers and sisters of the community who mourn the loss of a loved one. Let the ‘dead’ live happily in his new condition. The seer of Revelation describes it with striking images: “*God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There shall be no more death or mourning, crying out in pain for the world that was, has passed away*” (Rev 21:4).

There are many ways to retain the deceased: obsessive visits to the cemetery (like searching for the living among the dead), the morbid attachment to personal effects, and recourse to mediums to establish contact. It is painful to be left by a friend, but it is selfish to want to hold on to them. It would be like preventing a child from being born. “*Untie, let him go*”—Jesus sweetly repeats today to every disciple who does not resign himself to the death of a brother or a sister.

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READ: Jesus learns that Lazarus is sick but delays going to him. He speaks of sleep, and his disciples do not understand. Finally, Jesus goes to Bethany and speaks of himself as the Resurrection and the Life. He goes to the tomb and calls out to Lazarus. The words of Jesus

bring Lazarus to life.

REFLECT: What does resurrection mean? Was Lazarus resuscitated? He had to die eventually. What do you think of Jesus' relationship with Lazarus and his sisters? Is resurrection now?

PRAY: Every night, pray for a happy death. Believe in the resurrection of the body and pray for the assistance of those who have preceded you in faith—saints, family, and friends.

ACT: Lent is an anticipation of the new life in the risen Christ. Let us try to live today, looking forward to that great event.

Fernando Armellini