

HOMILY LENT SUNDAY 5-A (Homily 02)

“Believe, and Be Set Free”

(Ezekiel 37:12-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:8-11; John 11:1-45)

“I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves.”

That striking prophecy by the prophet Ezekiel in the first reading today, refers to more than just the resurrection of the body on the last day. The sad reality is that many people are trapped inside invisible, spiritual cages that keep them from living life to the full. A true story illustrates this reality.

A priest noticed a sparrow flying around his parish church on Saturday evening as he was preparing for mass the next day. Realizing it would be a distraction to have a sparrow flying around the church during the celebration of the Eucharist, he wisely waited until dusk, turned on the porch light and left the door open, hoping the sparrow would fly out on its own. When it didn't he tried to encourage it with a broom. Then the battle was on. For the next ten minutes, the sparrow tried to get out of every window, ran into statues, banged into walls and flew everywhere except out the open door. Finally, completely out of breath, the sparrow landed on a support rod, unable to fly anymore. The priest then stood on a pew, placed his finger behind the sparrow's legs, and it crawled back onto his finger. He then down stepped off the pew and walked out the open door with the sparrow puffing away on his finger. As he approached the rectory, the little sparrow got its wind back, and flew away.

An insight suddenly came to the priest. Many of us are like that sparrow, he thought, caught in an invisible cage of our own making. The bottom of that cage is the lack of love that we experience in our imperfect families and this imperfect world, ever since we were born, perhaps even before we were born. For some of us, that might be neglect, addiction, family breakups, even abuse. We lose our faith in a God who loves us, and start turning to false gods that do not love us, that will entrap us in the end. We learn very early not to talk, not to trust and not to feel, and start acting out of our painful emotions. We begin to construct our invisible, spiritual cage. We put up a front of false pride, and a back wall of anger and resentment. The sides might be sadness and self pity, as well as fear and guilt and many other painful emotions. We are like a little bird caught in this invisible spiritual cage, trying to get out the top. That top for so many becomes an addiction, made up of whatever false god we turned to in our desperate attempt to save

ourselves.

The answer to this dilemma is simple. We have to get sick and tired of being sick and tired, hit bottom, and admit our need for help. Lo and behold, we find at the bottom of our invisible cage a small door that is always open, the door of humility. Humility and reaching out for help is the key to being released from our grave, our spiritual cage. Ezekiel's promise of resurrection of the Spirit, of a new life beyond anything which we have known before, applies to many if not all of us, today, here and now. God's plan is to set us free from our spiritual cages.

The Gospel passage about the raising of Lazarus reveals how God saves us from those invisible cages, through faith in Jesus and the love of others. This miracle shows the pattern of grace working with nature to bring about new life.

The first thing that Jesus does when he learns that his friend Lazarus is dying is nothing. He waits. Then he strengthens the faith of the disciples, and especially the faith of Martha, who finally proclaims, much like Peter, amazing faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God who was to come into the world.

Next, Jesus feels the pain of Mary and all who are mourning with her. He weeps, and shares their pain. After that, Jesus does not zap the stone to remove it, though he could have. That would be Hollywood sensationalism and not humble faith. Instead, Jesus turns to the community to take away the stone. Then and only then does Jesus pray and speak words of new life. Lazarus comes back to life and emerges from his tomb. However, he is all wrapped up and smelly from being in a grave. Jesus now turns to the community again and commands them to unbind him and let him go free.

That precisely is the pattern by which Jesus works in our lives, to set us free from our own spiritual cages. He waits until we are ready to change, to grow, to be healed, to hit bottom and reach out for help. Then he strengthens our faith, through scripture, through the life of the Church, through friendship and life's events. Then Jesus shares our pain. One of the basic principles of that pattern, of having faith in Jesus and following Jesus is that Jesus does not prevent our pain and loss. Rather, Jesus is present in our pain and loss, and overcomes it by giving us the strength to deal with that pain and loss, and thus find new life. Whatever happened to us in the past, happened to him, even something as terrible as sexual abuse. When some people ask, "Where was God when this happened to me?" the answer is that Jesus was right there with them, experiencing whatever they were experiencing. Jesus shares our pain.

He then uses the community to loosen the invisible walls of our spiritual cages. That might be through a workshop, a conference, a conversation with a friend, some feedback, a challenge, a book, a myriad of possibilities. That is incarnational theology and how God works best in our lives.

And now, through prayer, Jesus gives us the power and grace to deal with our painful issues the same way he dealt with his pain on the cross, through forgiveness. That is truly how we are raised to new life, when we can forgive. We do not do that on our own. Rather, we pray, as Jesus prayed, and he speaks words of new life to us. That might happen during a dream, a conversation, a talk, a presentation, an insight, a memory, some understanding, in silence, or even during our sleep. Jesus mysteriously heals us of some painful emotion or some negative attitude. We change and grow.

However, even after that spiritual healing happens, we are not finished yet. Jesus then turns us over to the community to continue to unbind us, to journey with us, to accompany us to greater and greater freedom. This happens through our ongoing involvement in the church, in support groups, with our families and in our society. We continue experiencing greater freedom through fellowship and community.

One of the key elements in this gospel is the revelation of the reason why Jesus performed miracles. Jesus never wanted to be seen as a miracle worker or magician, out to impress people or to build up his reputation. He was single-minded when it came to miracles. The only reason that Jesus performed miracles at all was to help the people of that time, and our time as well, come to believe that he was sent by God, that he was God. That is why he chided the people who sought him out after the multiplication of the loaves. They only wanted the miracle, sensationalism, cheap grace, free bread, and were not interested in the implications of the fact that he came from God, that he was the Son of God. They wanted a miracle worker, not a Messiah who would grant them new life but would also challenge them to change their ways and to deepen their faith to recognize God working in the ordinary everyday events of their lives.

The raising of Lazarus was a miracle, yes, but a miracle that had a deeper meaning, the belief that Jesus was the one sent by God, that he was God. Note the number of times in this single Gospel passage that Jesus refers to belief in him. To his disciples, he says, "For your sake I am glad that I was not there so that you might *believe*." To Martha, he says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever *believes* in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and *believes* in me

will never die. Do you *believe* this?” And when Martha protested that there would be a stench if they remove the stone, Jesus reprimanded her, “Did I not tell you that if you *believed*, you would see the glory of God?” To the Father he states, “I am praying for the sake of the crowd standing here so that they may *believe* that you sent me.” And at the end of the passage we are told that many of the Jews who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, *believed* in him. The desired result of the miracle was faith in Jesus, leading to worship, leading to a transformation of one’s life through this faith process of rising to a new life in Christ even now, today.

The second reading adds the element of righteousness, or a transformed life in the Spirit, for those who truly believe in Jesus. That is another way of describing the experience of resurrection, of rising to a new quality of life with God in the Spirit for those who believe in Jesus.

In big things and in small things, faith in Jesus makes all the difference and can help us experience the glory of God as freedom and new life. A Jesuit theologian was ignorantly criticized by a cardinal many years ago and suffered greatly from that unjust criticism. He shared with his spiritual director on a retreat his resentment towards the cardinal. The spiritual director’s comment blew him away: “What a precious grace! What an opportunity to be like Christ! Did you ever think of giving thanks for that grace?” He pondered this comment by his spiritual director, prayed about it and finally was able to follow his suggestion. Even though he did not feel like doing it, he prayerfully thanked God for that unjust treatment, and his resentment slipped away. Then he remembered a remark someone had told him once, that at times we have to “faith it till we make it,” and realized he had followed that advice as well.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is a deep act of faith in the presence of Christ in Word and Sacrament, empowering us to be more Christ-like. This too is really a miracle of faith.

May our celebration today deepen our faith in Jesus, in who he is for us, and help us to experience his power and glory in our lives here and now.