

John 11: 1-45  
APRIL 6, 2014

As we come together this day  
aware of the emerging signs of spring  
we are called to reflect upon the gift of life,  
in the midst of the reality of death.

The Gospel story we just heard proclaimed  
is a customary choice for a Mass of the Resurrection  
where mourners might take comfort from the all too human response  
of Jesus to his good friends, Mary and Martha  
on the untimely death (and when is death timely)  
of their brother and his friend, Lazarus.

They rightly chastise him  
for his lack of presence  
in their hour of loss  
his very tardy response  
to their summons.

Confronted with the grief of the two sisters,  
the text says that Jesus was "greatly disturbed in his spirit" (11:33).  
In the story, it becomes obvious  
that the only answer to the question of suffering and evil  
is the one Jesus gave to Mary and Martha –  
shared helplessness,  
shared distress,  
and shared tears,  
with no attempt to try to explain God's seeming absence,  
but rather a trusting that,  
because God is all-loving and all-powerful,  
in the end all will be well  
and our pain will someday be redeemed in God's embrace.

Moving from the sisters,  
Jesus asks the crowd  
"Where have you laid him?"  
They say, "Lord, come and see" (Jn 11:35).  
And on hearing those words,

we might have a flashback to earlier in the Gospel (1:39 )  
when would-be disciples were seeking Jesus out, asking,  
"Lord, where are you staying?"  
And he responded, "Come and see."

Now, as a prelude to raising Lazarus from the dead,  
Jesus  
comes and sees  
death  
face to face,  
up close and personal.

This encounter is visually explored in the illumination from the SJB  
but from a different perspective.  
We are not outside the tomb weeping and waiting.  
We are inside the tomb  
with Lazarus  
as he hears the clarion call of his own name—  
as he awakens to the tunnel of white light  
beaming from the outside  
pulling him toward it.

A death head moth,  
an archetypical symbol of death and evil,  
spreads its patterned wings  
amidst the patterned wrappings of Lazarus' shroud,  
and is also inexplicably drawn to the light.

Appearing to rise up, Lazarus is not yet free.  
He is still bound by the garments of death,  
though the bands appear to be unraveling and coming away from his body.  
Significantly, there is a thin golden thread woven into the burial cloths,  
as if to intimate the truth  
that for believers,  
all is threaded through and through with Providential care and love.  
It holds everything together.  
Its tensile strength is stronger than death.  
Its tensile strength is stronger than life.

At the center of the tunnel of light

is a barely recognizable Jesus,  
a golden hand outstretched behind him.

Lazarus, bound by death  
was called to life by Jesus  
who is the Light and the Life of the world.

“Jesus does not go into the tomb to pull Lazarus out.  
He does not enter his realm to haul him to this side of living. Lazarus has to choose  
whether he will loose himself from the hold of the grave:  
its hold on him,  
his hold on it.  
Only when Lazarus takes a deep  
and deciding breath,  
rises,  
returns back across the boundary  
between the living and the dead:  
only then does Jesus say to the crowd,  
‘Unbind him, and let him go.’  
Not until Lazarus makes his choice  
does the unwinding of the shroud begin,  
and the grave clothes fall away.” (Jan Richardson)

In this Gospel we find the sacred synergy  
of humanity and divinity  
alive in our world,  
and the compassionate  
awesome power of Jesus,  
waking His dear friend from the deep sleep of death.

That's what Jesus does for us time and time again,  
repeatedly  
through the cycles of our life,  
through the daily losses and renewals  
through all the years of our lives  
until our final inevitable death.

And even that death  
is not a defeat,  
since Jesus has the ultimate power over death.

Jesus attests, "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."  
Physical death is not a defeat,  
just a natural step on the way to fullness of life with God. (RR)

This day,  
Jesus stands at the edge of our tombs,  
shouting "Come out!"  
luring us to walk into the light of day,  
pulling free of our grave clothes as we go,  
holding on--if even by a single thread  
to the Provident One who is light and life and love.

Without a doubt,  
the presence of Jesus attests to the truth  
that our Provident God will always come for us—  
that our Provident God is always with us,  
even in the tombs.

Truly, Easter is Christ going down into the tombs  
luring,  
pulling,  
and pushing life out of the earth.

In the days between now  
and our celebration of Jesus' resurrection  
let's listen for the call that lures us to choose life.

