

In the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The episode of Christ's raising Lazarus from the dead is quite rich. The Church gives it to us on the Sunday before Palm Sunday because it is meant to frame our preparation for Holy Week. Essentially, Christ tells His followers before heading to Bethany, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, SO THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE."

The first lesson Christ teaches today is that HE IS WILLING TO DIE for each of His disciples. As soon as Christ announced that He would go to Lazarus, the disciples exclaimed, "The Jews were just now trying to stone You, are You going there again?" They all recognized that Christ was risking His life to go bring Lazarus back to life. We now know in hindsight that their worst fears were about to come true — Christ would be captured, tortured and killed. He would indeed give His life to return Lazarus to life. But our Lord loved Lazarus enough to do it. Lazarus was His friend, and as Christ would say about a week later during the Last Supper, "No one has any greater love than this, to lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13).

The central truth our Lord wants us to capture is that WE ARE HIS FRIENDS, TOO, and that out of love for us, He went up the mountain not just to bring Lazarus back to life, but to give His life to bring EACH OF US back to life. Right after He described that no one has greater love than to lay down his life for his friends, He said: "YOU are my friends *if* you do what I command you." (Jn 15:14-15). It's obvious that Christ, from a distance, could have cured Lazarus and even brought him back to life. By going up to work the miracle in person, however, our Lord was showing everyone that helping Lazarus was worth His own life. In the

same way, God could have come up with another way to save us without Christ's going up to Calvary and being murdered on a Cross, but He likewise wanted to show us that we were worth saving. The greatest source of our human dignity is that Christ accounted our lives more valuable than His own, that He gave His life for ours.

The second thing Christ wanted to manifest through this miracle was His POWER OVER DEATH, so that we might have faith in what He said would happen to Him after His death and what would happen to us after our death. Even though Christ had already raised from the dead both the daughter of Jairus (Mk 5:22 ff) and the only son of the widow of Nain (Lk 7:11 ff), He knew that His disciples would have a terribly difficult time maintaining hope after they would see Him tortured, crucified, and buried in the tomb the following week. He wanted to give them a clear example that with God all things are possible. The Jews believed that a person's soul hovered around the body for three days after death; for Him to bring Lazarus back to life on the FOURTH day was the greatest manifestation of our Lord's divine power. He was the Lord of life and death.

The third thing Christ shows us is what resurrection and life really are. Very often we think of "resurrection" and "life" as CONCEPTS, or STATES, or THINGS. Christ wants us to recognize that resurrection and life are, rather, a PERSON, or more specifically a RELATIONSHIP WITH A PERSON. That person is Christ Himself: "*I AM* the resurrection and the life!" To be risen from the dead, to be fully alive, means to be in a living, loving relationship with our Lord, who teaches us that resurrection and life are not meant to be

delayed. Our Lord wanted us to realize that the resurrection and life were supposed to be experienced IN THE PRESENT through right relationship with Christ. But for us to experience it, we need not only to change our understanding of resurrection and life from concepts to a person, but many of us will have to change our understanding of Christ from just a past historical figure, to a living, acting, breathing, loving Savior present right now.

How do we, in this life, encounter Christ as the resurrection and the life? He created the sacraments as the way, *par excellence*, for us to enter into His risen life and into a much deeper personal relationship with Him. The sacraments help us to pass from death to life. We can mention three of them today:

In baptism, we die with Christ and rise with Him. St. Paul stressed this truth in his letter to the Romans, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with Him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:3-4 ). Baptism gives us this newness of life, but it has to be more than just a memory of a past event. The Lord wants us to recall the meaning of our own baptism and live those Baptismal vows of placing God truly above *all* things, so that at Easter we might experience a great spiritual rebirth and walk ever more deeply in the baptismal “newness of life” that never ages.

The Fathers of the Church called confession our “second baptism.” When we’re spiritually dead through mortal sins committed after our baptism, when we’ve evicted the supernatural life of God from our souls by choosing, in disguise, Barabbas over Christ Jesus, the Lord doesn’t give up on us. ON THE DAY HE ROSE FROM THE DEAD, Easter Sunday Evening, Christ established the sacrament of confession, so that we might experience the full fruits of His resurrection in this life. He said to the apostles that evening, “Just as the Father sent Me [to forgive the sins of the world], so I send you.” He breathed on them so that they would receive the power of the Holy Spirit, and sent them out to forgive and retain sins in His name (Jn 20:19-23). His doing this on Easter Sunday points to the fact that every reconciliation is meant to be a RESURRECTION. In the sacrament of confession, God brings us who are dead in sin to life again. He calls us out of our graves and puts His spirit once again within us. He rolls away the stones from our tombs and says: “Come out! Come out of your indifference! Leave your sins, your spiritual laziness, your selfishness, your desperation behind!” He sends His priests forth to unbind us from our sins. But so often, I sit in that confessional all by myself with no one coming to me! We have to recognize we are sinners in need of that resurrection to new life, that our sins have put us in the tomb. Many Catholics today don’t think about their sins or see them as so insignificant that they don’t need the Sacrament of Confession. But then why did Christ have to die and rise from the dead to give us that Sacrament? Out of love, He created the sacrament of confession so that we might receive something far greater than Lazarus experienced.

The third encounter with Christ, the resurrection and the life, occurs in the Eucharist. One year before the Last Supper, Christ gave us a glimpse of the power of the Eucharist, when He said: “Amen, Amen, I say to you, *unless* you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.” Then He stressed the Eucharist’s connection to HIS resurrection and OUR resurrection: “Those who eat My flesh and drink My blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day” (Jn 6:53-54). For those of us who want to experience His resurrection in this life and the next, the path Christ gives us is worthy reception of the Eucharist.

We saw at the end of the Gospel that Christ’s action led “many of the Jews [...] to believe in Him.” Christ had worked this miracle precisely so that His disciples might believe. But we also know that it led to another reaction: it led others “from that day... to plan to put him to death” (Jn 11:54). Similarly, Christ’s words and actions today will either lead us to a much greater faith in Him OR it will lead to us to try TO PUT THAT MESSAGE TO DEATH within us. If what Christ has done today leaves us unchanged, if it leaves us without a profound conversion, then that means that we have put that message to death within our hearts; and whenever we put that message to death, whatever the cause of the resistance, it means — whether we realize it or not — that we’re putting the Messenger to death, too.

And so He asks each of us individually, as He asked Martha: “Do YOU believe this?” If you do, then allow Him to change every aspect of who you are and come out of your tombs as Lazarus did those many years ago.