

HOMILY LENT SUNDAY 5-A
“Believe, and see the glory of God”
(Ezekiel 37:12-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:8-11; John 11:1-45)

What grave are you in right now?

Believe in Jesus, and you will experience the glory of God.

Sandra participated in a 12 Step pilgrimage. A fashion designer, she wore heavy make up and was dressed in “the best”, so much so that she stood out like a sore thumb, and put the rest of her group on the defensive, not knowing what to make of her. Her questions were detached, distant, cold, unfeeling, like “What is emotional pain anyway?” She seemed unreal. However, when it was her turn to stand and report back, she collapsed to the floor, sobbing uncontrollably, even hyperventilating. The director came, assessed that she was trying to get too much out all at once, affirmed what she had already done, set her at ease and gave her some time to herself. When she came back to the group, there was no make up; she wore casual clothes, and her attitude had changed. For the rest of the session, she delighted her group with her openness, courage, questions and growth. She had dropped her mask, and had come out of her shell - a new Sandra was in the process of being born.

God’s promise today is freedom and the fullness of life. Through faith and fellowship, God will raise us from the depths of our personal graves, fill us with God’s spirit, and restore us to well being.

What are these tombs? Not graves in the ground, but our own sins, sinfulness, addictions, defects of character and painful emotions that threaten to ruin our lives and the lives of our families and communities.

Some of these tombs are: denial, blame, greed, gossip, jealousy, lust, alcoholism, drug addiction, gambling and bingo addiction, stubbornness and self-pity, and more. In a way, they boil down to four larger tombs: guilt and fear; anger and resentment. Indeed, unforgiveness is probably the most common and most devastating of these tombs.

God keeps his promise. God is freeing his people from these tombs, through faith and fellowship, a way so simple that only those with humble faith will really find freedom.

The gospel of Lazarus is a beautiful example of how God works in our lives to free us, now, today. Let’s take a closer look to see how Jesus heals us today.

First, Jesus waits for Lazarus to die. He also waits for us to hit bottom, to get sick and tired, to be really ready to let go and change. That can take years. The other day, a young mother spent every cent she had on VLT’s pumping coins in furiously. Finally, with no food left in the house and her kids hungry, she phoned her mother to ask for help; saw her social worker, contacted Gamblers Anonymous, and started a healing journey. Jesus had

been waiting for her all these years.

Then, in the gospel, Jesus overcame the disciples' fear. Change is scary - we need to go where we have never gone before, and often we are afraid of the very things that will help us. In all kinds of ways, especially through family and friends who really care, Jesus overcomes our fear and gives us the courage and faith to go and die with him, as Thomas says in the gospel.

Next Jesus strengthens Martha's faith in resurrection, change, transformation today in her life, not just at the end of time. Jesus also strengthens our faith that healing can take place in our lives and families today, especially through his word, and the example of others. When Alex went to his first AA meeting, and saw Louis, another First Nations person chairing the meeting, he thought, if he can do it, so can I. Jesus strengthened his faith.

Then, something surprising and significant happens. Jesus weeps for his friend, and he weeps for us. Faith doesn't automatically remove our pain and suffering. Instead, it gives us strength to go through the pain, especially the pain of past memories and hurts, to forgiveness, healing and new life. God did not prevent our pain; instead, God, in Jesus, feels and suffers our pain with us. Jesus knows us, understands us, feels and walks through our pain with us.

Next, Jesus involves the community. Instead of doing it himself, he asks the men to take away the tombstone. We have all built up spiritual walls around ourselves, walls of denial, blame, fear and coping mechanisms. Jesus uses the community (Round Ups, friends, workshops, events of life, Cursillos, etc) to loosen up our walls. This coincides nicely with Steps 1-5 of the 12 Step program.

Then Jesus acted, prayed to the Father, and spoke words of new life to Lazarus. Jesus does the same for us. At some point (we often don't even know where or when), Jesus speaks words of new life to us. A change starts to happen in us. We begin to feel different, freer and lighter. This coincides with Steps 6-7 of the 12 step program - we humbly ask God to remove these defects of character.

Lazarus was alive, and out of the tomb, yet still all bound up, hobbling, and smelling badly. So Jesus involves the community again, probably this time asking the women to "Unbind him, let him go free." The burial cloth is a symbol of our sinfulness that still clings to us and tries to pull us back into our tombs. We must have follow-up, continued support on our healing journeys. We must get involved in community, in fellowship, in prayer with others in an ongoing way, so as to not slip back. This compares to Steps 8-12 of the 12 step program. We need to make amends to others, soak up their pain; keep an eye on ourselves; enter into daily prayer and meditation, and continually share our growth and spiritual experiences with others as a way of helping them, and ourselves, to keep on healing.

All too often, people get proud, self reliant, decide they can make it on their own, and they stop growing and switch over to a dry drunk instead. They may stay sober and not

act out of their addiction, but never really experience the inner freedom, joy and serenity God wants for them. They sell themselves and others short.

At a workshop once, I asked Tony how long he had been sober. He answered, "23 years." I asked him what Step he was on. He answered, "Step 1!" Then I asked his wife seated next to him if he was on a dry drunk, and she nodded her head vigorously.

There are many opportunities to experience this process, to give God a chance. Healing circles, wellness groups, 12 step meetings, Marriage Encounter Love Circles, gospel sharing sessions, catechetics, Cursillo, 12 Step pilgrimages are all opportunities to enter into the process of healing through faith and fellowship. Growth is exciting. Recently, a man told me that his temper was decreasing ever since he started getting involved in the Church after twenty years of absence. What are we waiting for?

The Jerome Biblical Commentary has some interesting insights into this gospel passage. The raising of Lazarus is the last and greatest of Jesus' special signs, that is, a sign of the resurrection and of the rising from sin to grace that takes place in the soul of the believer. Not found in the synoptic gospels, Lazarus represents the Christian, the one who believes in Christ. The words of Thomas, who appears in connection with the great mysteries of Christ's glorification, sums up the destiny of all Christians, to be dead with Christ and alive with him in his resurrection. While death is the common lot of all, faith in Christ will bring the believer to life again in the resurrection. Furthermore, for the believer the effects of the resurrection already take place in realized eschatology - since the believer already possess true or eternal life, physical death can never really affect him. Jesus prays to show that he is not only a wonder-worker, but the emissary of the Father of life.

The Eucharist is a gathering in faith and fellowship, and is a source of Easter freedom for us, if we approach it with humble faith.

So, believe in Jesus, and you will experience the glory of God. Put your trust in Jesus, enter in fellowship wherever you can, and you will experience the freedom God promises us.

