

John 11:1-45
5th Sunday in Lent

March 29, 2020—Shepherd of the Mountains, Pinetop, AZ

INI

As Christians we know the joy of Easter Sunday, so we want to skip to it as fast as we can. We want Easter breakfasts. We want lilies. We want those pastel colors that were OK back in the 80s, and are somehow OK again on Easter Sunday every year. We want them. We want dinners with family and friends in the afternoon. We want egg hunts for our children and maybe a basket full of jelly beans and chocolates. We want the spring weather. We want the joy and the alleluias. But to get to the joy of Easter, we have to live through Lent first. And we have to live through Holy Saturday first.

We're not even to Holy Week yet, but... just like we are in a different, deeper kind of Lent than we are used to, we are also, in a way, living already in the reality of Holy Saturday.

What do I mean by that? Well, think about the disciples on the day in between Good Friday and Easter morning. Their master, their teacher, their Lord had been killed. They couldn't see what was going to come next (even though He had told them). So, they shut themselves up in a room. They were isolated from everyone else out of fear and uncertainty. So many questions on their minds. Are we safe here? How long will this last? What comes next? It was their Holy Saturday reality.

If you're anything like me, a fog of uncertainty has encompassed your daily routine. There is still stuff to be done, but suddenly, you're forced to think about those things, those mundane tasks that used to be muscle memory. We used to mindlessly perform those tasks. They were merely things we did in the in between moments, as we went from one highlight in the week to the next highlight. But now, that's all there is. Those mundane tasks become time to think, to wonder. Am I doing enough to be safe? What comes next? How long will this last? When do we get to the good stuff?

It even gets to the point for me, where I walk from one room to another, but then there are so many thoughts racing through my head, so many questions, that when I get to the next room, I know I went in there with a purpose, but a new question gets stacked onto the pile. Why did I come into this room? And the other questions still remain. What's next? What do we do? How long is this going to last? We're not even to Holy Week yet, and we haven't felt the privilege the disciples felt just from being one of Jesus' disciples, and we certainly haven't felt the sorrow they felt seeing their Lord crucified, at least we haven't felt it in the same way because we know the joy of Easter. We know the rest of the story. Yet right now, we might have at least a hint of what they might have felt on Holy Saturday and we're not even to Holy Week yet.

This same Holy Saturday feeling came to Mary and Martha before they got to Holy Week. Lazarus was sick. He was deathly sick. Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus about their brother. But Jesus remained where He was for 2 days before coming to them. By the time He got there, Lazarus had been dead for four days. They knew it wasn't the end, but still... "Lord, if only you had been here..." Martha certainly knew. Lazarus would be raised again in the resurrection on the last day. But when would that be? How long would she have to wait? Two more days? Two more weeks? Two more months? How long?

And then Easter joy also came for them, even before Holy Week. **"Lazarus, come out,"** Jesus cried out with a loud voice. And Lazarus was raised from the dead.

Aren't we longing for such a command from our Risen Lord right now? We're longing for that good, joyous, Easter message of our own as we live in our own Holy Saturday.

But the reality is that we've been living in it for a while. Even before the current pandemic, we have been longing for Easter. The world has been broken in so many other ways than just having

a virus going around. There is hatred. There is war. There is greed. There is suffering. There is our own sinful selfish nature. There has always been uncertainty and doubt even before any viral pandemic came onto the scene. But there has also always been hope for those who trust in God's promises. Even before Holy Saturday, there was an Easter hope...for Martha, for the saints of old, for Job who said, "I know that my Redeemer lives."

Our epistle reading appointed for today is the first several verses from Romans 8. In later verses ^(Romans 8:18-25) of that same chapter, Paul says he considers that **"the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."** ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."

But we don't get to jump to Easter, at least not our Easter, the resurrection of our flesh. We first have to live a while in Holy Saturday. And in this season, there is mourning. There is still death. There is still suffering. There is still our own sinful flesh causing us trouble. And so, our long season of Holy Saturday is one of grieving, grieving over our sin, grieving over the effects of sin in the world. But it is not only a season of grieving, because our Holy Saturday is taking place after that first Easter morning. Our Holy Saturday, even with the grief and trouble mixed in, is one of hopeful endurance.

In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul tells them and us that he doesn't want us to grieve as others do who have no hope. He's speaking about those who have died, but we can certainly apply it to our current grieving, over a loss of normalcy, over loss of certain dreams and plans, over loss of lives around the globe, over loss of family celebrations, over loss (for a time) of meeting together in worship and around the Lord's table. Even as we grieve these things for a while, there is hope.

¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

I've never really thought about what that command will be from our Lord at His return. The text doesn't tell us, but whatever it will be, it will have the same effect as His command to Lazarus in the tomb. Come out. And we will. We will come out of our homes. We will come out of our routines. We will come out of a world once subjected to sin and suffering. We will come out of even our graves. We will come out of whatever was and into His glorious new creation. And that is why we hope even in our season of Holy Saturday. Because Holy Saturday leads to Easter. However long it takes...the current crisis, the crises that are sure to follow in the future, the rest of our lives, it will lead to Easter Joy for all who place their hope in our Risen Savior, Jesus Christ. And we will come out to meet Him and be with Him in His kingdom which has no end. Amen.