

Fifth Sunday of Lent (A), April 10, 2011

All of our readings today are about death! Death is a part of life. It's not a pleasant subject; we may not like to think about it. But death is not only an inevitability someday, it's also a constant reality in our present lives. We see it in the cycles of nature: living organisms die all the time, and provide the nutrients for new life. Even within our very own bodies, old cells are constantly dying – and being replaced by new ones. (I had a skin cancer removed three weeks ago, it was here in my ear, and went deeper than they thought. They even had to do a skin graft. But here, behind my ear, and inside, there are new cells, filling in – it's almost fully healed now. Capitalists even talk these days about the wonders of "creative destruction" going on in our economy! I'm not sure I like calling it creative, as it hides the fact that real people get hurt during that creative destruction, but it happens.

And of course, we do talk about death. We talk about dead spots on our lawn, or a dead spot in our schedule, or maybe a meeting we were forced to endure which was "Just Dead!" It might be our self-confidence that died – last Thursday night was my bowling night, and I'm our team's anchor man, the go-to guy when the game is on the line. I needed a strike in the last frame, or even a spare. I threw a good ball, and felt great! But I left a stupid ten-pin! So, I had to pick the spare. You know, I usually love that situation, the game on the line...but my confidence suddenly went dead, and I missed the spare. Teams go dead too – talk about the Mariners giving up 10 runs in the 4th inning at their home opener on Friday night! Liz and I go to a lot of games together, and we almost never leave a baseball game early. But we left that one after the 4th inning.

And death can be very intimate too, death can really be inside of us, our lives can have dead places in them. These dead places can develop in relationships – in friendships, or in marriages. One of the great sadnesses that I sometimes witness at Children's Hospital is with a young married couple who suffer the death of a child...and then, weeks or months later, their marriage breaks apart. Fr. Tim and I have shared with one another over the past few months how affected we both have been – how...sad... because of the marriages that have "died" within our parish community in the past couple of years. And within us as individuals, too, there can be dead places. Depression, fear, grief, or guilt can all be so powerful that we feel utterly lifeless, it strikes our sense of the meaning, right at our center, our core, even our faith – life feels very "dead." And for any of us, dead places can occur spiritually. We can have a numbness within that deadens us to the awareness of how much we really need God. We can grow a coldness of heart that pushes the needs of our neighbor away to the edges of our awareness.

These dead places in our lives are truly more threatening than physical death itself. These dead places not only prevent us from experiencing the fullness of happiness, they keep us from becoming the luminous beings we are made to be. They cause us to shrink back from acting with courage and faith-filled confidence in this darkened world. These dead places numb us, isolate us from the needs of the world around us, and blind us to a vision of God's creation as it is meant to be.

Where are your dead places? That's a good Lenten reflection! Where in your life, or in your heart, has life been lost? Are your faith, your hope, your love buried in some tomb? It happens. It happens to sinners; but it has happened to saints too.

But though our scriptures today speak to us about death, the words are also full of life. Our first Reading is thrilling! In fact, take your Bible and read the words from Ezekial, Chapter 36 through today's passage – it's about a page. It was written during the time of captivity, when all seemed dark, when the country was conquered, the holy Temple razed to the ground, the leaders of the people carried away in chains. But Ezekial hears the word of God that God will open their graves, that the bones of the dead will rise, and Ezekial has a vision, and hears a noise, a rattling, as the bones came together, sinews and flesh covered them, breath came into them, and they stood on their feet, a vast multitude! It was an unforgettable, prophetic image, for God to tell the people that hope was not lost.

And our gospel today is poignant. When Jesus finally arrived in Bethany, Martha chided him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus said, "Your brother will rise again." Martha replied, "I know he will rise again, in the Resurrection on the Last Day." That's a very respectful way of saying, "Don't tell me that 'He'll rise someday' stuff. Where were you? My brother is dead!" But Jesus then made resurrection a **present-tense reality** by calling Lazarus out of the tomb. "Unbind him, and let him go free!"

I think that the greatest Easter truth for us in our lives today is not that we are to live *newly after death*. Of course that is great news, and it brings hope and comfort, especially at our most difficult times. But it also means that we are able to live *newly here and now* by the power of the Resurrection. Resurrection is not just "everlasting life" – meaning, an endless **quantity** of life. Resurrection is also a **quality** of life that begins in the present. And it begins when we realize that, in Christ, death has no power over us.

I'm 63 years old. Some might credit me with a faithful life, but I know myself. I know ways in which I've failed to be the person I could be -- when dead places, and the fear of different kinds of death have held me back from being the man I could be. But hey, I am 63 years old, and I am think that I am **finally** beginning to understand what the words mean, "Unbind him, and let him go free!" I have to tell you, I am full of hope for the future, for whatever it is God has in store for me.

Think of the dead places in your own life. There may have been dark days of suffering. A menacing difficulty without a solution. A loss that tore your heart out. The terrain of our lives is full of dead places. If we have lived long at all, we have lived through many deaths.

By what power, then, are we all still here? How have we survived so much dying? And beyond mere surviving, how might it be that we may have actually grown through these experiences? It is not through our own abilities. It is through the grace and power of the One who transforms death into life.

As you meet the Lord today in our Eucharist...know that He comes as "the Resurrection and the Life." Trust him. He wants to call forth life from all the dead places.

Deacon Denny Duffell