“I Am the Resurrection and the Life”

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

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Fifth Sunday Lent

Live-Streamed from St. Mary’s Cathedral, Fargo

Dear brothers and sisters, we come together once again in spirit for this Fifth Sunday of Lent. I know we are all experiencing the sadness of not coming together for the celebration of Mass, and yet, there is a bond that holds us together, even from a distance, and that bond is our life in Christ. He is with us, and we are one in him. Some of you saw our Holy Father Pope Francis on Friday praying in the great square of St. Peter’s Basilica. The square, which is usually filled with thousands of people, was empty because of the health crisis that grips our world. But Pope Francis wasn’t speaking to an empty square. He was speaking to all of us, to the entire world, because even from a distance, the whole Church is one in Christ. And in the same way, even though we must remain in our homes this morning, we are drawn into the embrace of Christ, and he is with us.

Many of us have experienced the death of a loved one at some time in our lives—a parent or grandparent, a spouse, a child, a brother or sister, a friend. And when this happens, we experience feelings of loss, powerlessness, that a door has closed and won’t reopen. Perhaps we question, we wonder why, we feel fear. Right now the world is fearful at the sickness and death that so many have suffered in recent weeks. But in the face of death, we can hear the words of Jesus as he says to Martha: “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.” These words from today’s gospel are often proclaimed at funerals, and they give us great hope.

During these weeks of Lent, we have seen the mysteries of our faith and the mystery of Christ himself unfold before us. We saw the humanity of Jesus as he experienced temptations in the desert. We saw the glory of his divinity in his transfiguration. We witnessed the abundance of his grace and mercy pouring out in his conversation with the woman at the well. And we experienced his healing and enlightenment as he restored sight to the man who was born blind.

But today, in an even more startling way, we see the power of Jesus over the last enemy—death. John shows us the dramatic story of the death of Lazarus and the power of Jesus to bring life out of death. It would be his last great miracle before his own death on the cross. Jesus came to Bethany and called Lazarus back to life even after he had been in the tomb for four days. There could be no mistake that he was truly dead and now was restored to life, a miracle that no one had ever seen.

Lazarus was indeed raised from the dead, but he was raised once again to an earthly life. Lazarus would live, but he would someday die once again. But Jesus came not just to give earthly life. He came to give eternal life that cannot be touched by death. Raising Lazarus from the dead was a sign of God’s power. He says, “Father, I thank you for hearing me. I know that you always hear me; but because of the crowd here I have said this, that they may believe that you sent me.” But this miracle was also a foreshadowing of Christ’s own death and resurrection. And it is a foreshadowing of our death and resurrection too.
What are the practical consequences of this amazing miracle? What do we take from it? First, we receive the gift of hope. In the darkness and sadness of death, Jesus was a light of hope for Martha and Mary. In the silence of Lazarus’ death echoed the call to life that we all hope to hear. And the second effect of this event should be a deeper faith. Jesus asked Martha, “Do you believe?” And she said, “Yes Lord, I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the One who is coming into the world.” Martha was able to put her whole faith in Jesus. Do we? Has our faith grown stronger, more mature, more trusting? If Christ has power over death, should we not put our full faith in him?

And finally, the raising of Lazarus calls us to repentance. In the second reading, Paul says, “If Christ is in you…the spirit is alive because of righteousness.” If Christ is in you. “If” is the key. Christ is not in us if we choose to remain in sin, because sin is incompatible with life in Christ. Sin, especially mortal sin, is a turning away, a pushing away from life in Christ. And this is why there is such an urgent need for repentance and reconciliation with God. It’s a greater miracle than even the raising of Lazarus, because it restores us to eternal life. Repentance is a gateway to heaven and a weapon against evil and death.

My friends, we began Lent four weeks ago with ashes, because we know we shall return to dust. But we will end this season with Easter, with a proclamation of eternal life. As we marvel at the raising of Lazarus today, let us look with confidence to the new life of Easter that awaits us.