

5th Sunday of Lent, A

“Lazarus is dead,” Jesus tells the disciples.

It is not hard to imagine the questions that might be running through the minds of the disciples and the hearts of Mary and Martha. They are the same kind of questions I have heard being asked, and I have asked myself every time my parish and its surrounding community endured tragic accidents, deaths, and funerals that came way too soon. They are the same kind of questions we ask ourselves and each other whenever life is interrupted and changed in ways we do not want. They are the same questions we ask when circumstances show us how difficult, fragile, and beautiful life is.

Why? How could this happen? What is next for me? Is this an ending or a beginning? Could it be both? How do I move forward? How do I make sense of what has happened? What will life be like now? Why didn't it work out the way I wanted? What could or should I have done differently? Is there life after this? Why didn't God do something? Every one of you could add to this list. We all have our questions, thousands of them.

The ultimate question, the one that lies behind and grounds all our other questions, is the one God asks Ezekiel. **“Son of man, can these bones come back to life?”** That is what we are asking. That is what I want to know. That question is the valley that cuts through the center of our lives. And yet, it is not a simple yes-or-no question. Neither is it

answered once and for all. It is a question we live with and ask over and over.

What is the valley that cuts through the center of your life? What questions did you ask when the Lazarus of your life died? What questions are you asking today?

Every time life sets before me those kinds of questions, I am reminded, once again, that I live with more questions than answers, and the answers I do have no longer seem to carry the weight and authority they once did. Our lives are filled with unanswered questions.

My experience is that the unanswered questions of life tend to leave us disappointed; disappointed in life itself, in ourselves, in another, or sometimes in God. Disappointment is wrapped up in and bound by our unmet expectations. That is where Mary and Martha are in today's gospel. They are disappointed. **“Lord, if you have been here, my brother would not have died,”** they both say separately to Jesus. Even the crowd that follows Mary is disappointed. **“Could not the one who opened the eyes of the blind man have done something so that this man would not have died?”** they ask.

I know that disappointment, and I will bet you do too. We want answers, explanations, and understanding. But maybe there are not any; at least, not the kind most of us want. Maybe life itself is an unanswered question, and maybe that is how we are to live it.

Jesus does not offer answers or explanations to Mary, Martha, or us. Instead, he uses our disappointment as **“an agency for transformation.”** Jesus seems to know that disappointment is inevitable, necessary, and even a faithful response to life’s circumstances. He neither criticizes nor ridicules Martha and Mary for their disappointment. Instead, he uses it as an opening and entry point into their lives.

There is something honest, heartfelt, and real about Mary and Martha’s words of disappointment to Jesus. They are offering and making themselves available to him. They rethink what they know about life, death, and resurrection. They risk smelling the stench of death. They are walking in that valley that cuts through the center of their lives.

To attempt to protect ourselves from disappointment and demand all kinds of answers to life’s questions is to close ourselves off to the vulnerabilities that make real life, love, intimacy, and relationships with God or with another possible. It limits what we are willing to risk giving or receiving. It leaves the stone in place over Lazarus’ tomb and refuses to consider God’s question to Ezekiel.

While we might want to escape our disappointments, life wants to use them. Life will not waste our disappointments, and Jesus always stands in the middle of life. Disappointment calls into question our assumptions about life, ourselves, each other, and God.

Disappointment asks us to reassess ourselves and our inner world. It is the first step in freeing us from misguided assumptions. It breaks old patterns of seeing and relating that have become hardened and less than life-sustaining. It opens our eyes to a deeper way of seeing. Jesus uses our disappointment with life's unanswered questions to invite us to a **“larger foundational reality”** beyond what we create for ourselves and project onto the world.

Isn't that what he is doing with Mary and Martha? **“I am the resurrection and life.” “Take away the stone.” “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” “Lazarus, come out!” “Untie him and let him go.”** With those words, Jesus is holding the valley that cuts through the center of their lives before Martha and Mary. **“Son of man, can these bones come back to life?”**

The great question before us, Mary and Martha, is whether we experience our disappointment as an opportunity to see and engage our lives and world in new, different, and life-giving ways, or whether we experience it only as a wound that makes us retreat from further participation. It is a question we answer every day. It is a question Jesus answered throughout his life.

Don't think that Jesus did not know disappointment. He surely did. He knew disappointment in the death of Lazarus, the crucifixion, Peter's drawn sword and violence, Judas' betrayal, the disciples sleeping in the garden, the way his Father's house had been turned into a den of robbers,

his disciples arguing about who was the greatest, the disciples' misunderstanding of who he is, the world's refusal to receive him, and in a myriad of other ways.

Every disappointment held before him, as it does for us, the choice between engaging or retreating from the world and our lives. He refused to be stopped by his disappointments. Instead, he used them as entry points into our lives. They became points of identification with us. His every disappointment becomes one more step deeper into the valley that cuts through the center of our lives.

So let me ask you again. What is the valley that cuts through the center of your life? Whatever it is, it is a place through which Jesus has walked and shown the way forward. It is not the dark place we often think it is. It is an opening into the light, a path that opens to new life, a clearer way of seeing, a truer sense of ourselves, and a deeper experience of Christ. It becomes the place of our unbinding and being let go.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In this valley **“the question mark of life becomes God’s exclamation point”** – the exclamation point of love, the exclamation point of life and light, the exclamation point of mercy and forgiveness, the exclamation point of wisdom, beauty, and generosity, the exclamation point of hope, healing, and compassion, and ultimately, the exclamation point of God’s **“yes”** to you and your life.

“Son of man, can these bones come back to life?” The answer to that question echoes throughout the valley that cuts through the center of our lives. Yes, they can! Yes, they do! Yes, they will! **Amen.**