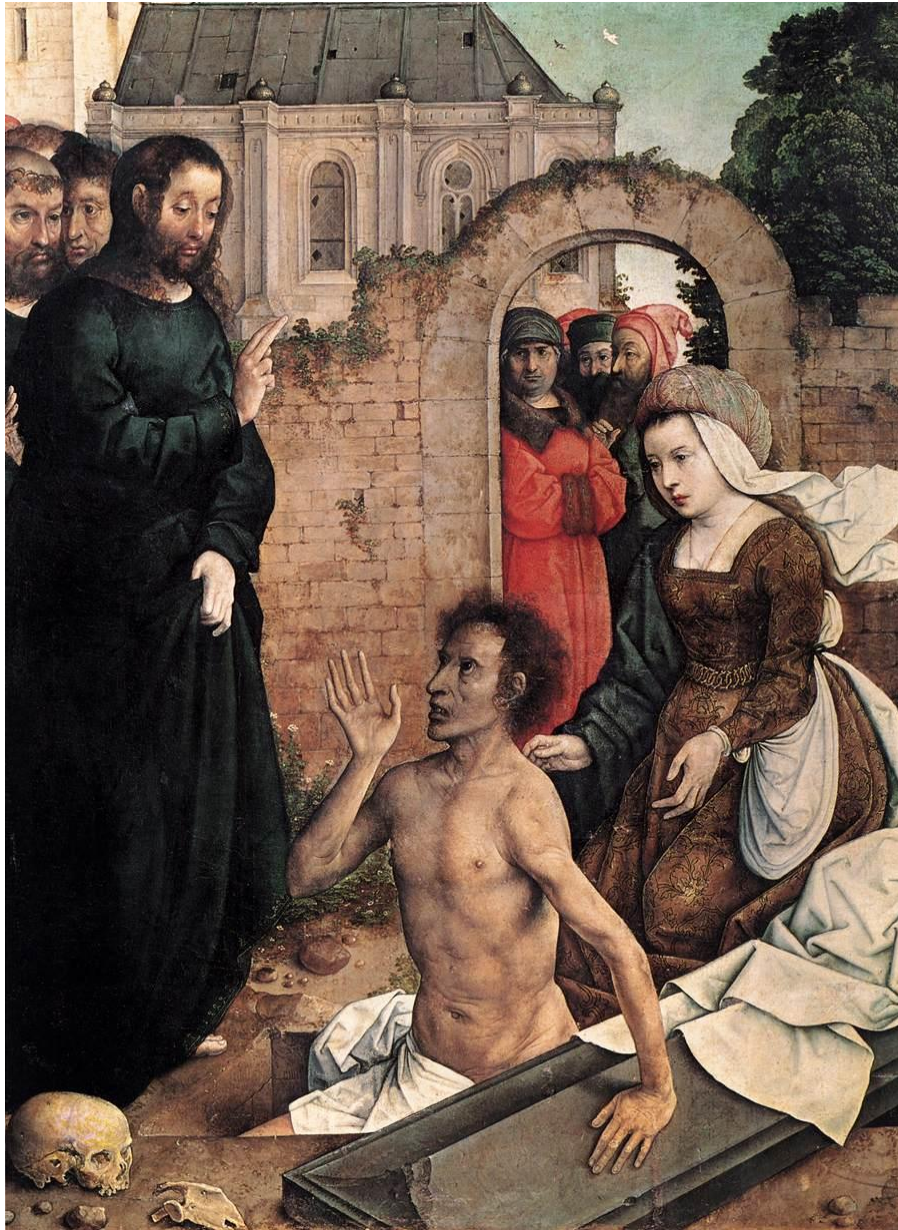


Sunday March 26th, 2023
The Fifth Sunday of Lent
Bill Bixby



de Flandes, J. (n.d.). The Resurrection of Lazarus. Wikimedia Commons. Retrieved March 21, 2023 from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Juan_de_Flandes_-_The_Raising_of_Lazarus_-_WGA12040.jpg.

It was food pantry day—a gray Wednesday—at Harmony

Community Church in North Lawndale, on Chicago's West Side, and I had just poked clumsily through the industrial grade plastic strips which covered the double doors into the bright, bustling basement hall. I was late—WAY later than the fiercely dedicated ladies of Harmony's weekly food sharing ministry with 200 to 250 neighboring households. In just two hours.

Mary, a formidable woman, ruled the dairy station.

(I worked the table of fresh and frozen meat right next to hers.) Her folding chair throne was surrounded by cases of egg cartons, crates of milk, boxes full of wholesale cheese and butter, and once in a while a jillion packets of a speciality item like yogurt or pudding packs.

With three or four other founding mothers of the food pantry, Mary was also sovereign in the steady stream of wide-ranging, wisdom-laced, no-nonsense commentary on doings in the church, neighborhood and city, often punctuated with 'uh huh,' 'no they din't?' and 'best pray on that.' Mary did not ever miss a thing, or a beat, and when she spotted me struggling through those plastic strips, after months away from the ministry, she called out in her sonorous, husky voice, with just a dash of dry wit:

“LAZARUS!”

John’s Lazarus—presented here in John 11 & John 12—brother of Mary and Martha of Bethany, the never-speaking Lazarus (not once), the Lazarus who debuts from a sickbed, then a grave—is known as Saint Lazarus, full-sized nimbus and all, in the Eastern or Orthodox branches of Christianity. For our kin in Christ in those traditions, this text shaping us today is at the center of praise and custom each year on the day before Palm Sunday, called Lazarus Saturday. Following closely both the narrative detail and distinctive themes of the gospel of John, the Orthodox press the raising up of Lazarus into the very fabric of the paschal experience in Holy Week. They foreground the twin dynamics of John’s witness in the text: in John, the freeing of Lazarus from death is the immediate cause of an eruption of acclaim on Palm Sunday, and the final straw toward the murderous plot by the powers that be to do Jesus in.

The Eastern Church’s ancient insight, the Eastern Church’s ample joy, then, is proclaiming a salvation reality

framed, fore and aft, if you will, by resurrection. Indeed, in Lazarus, drawn up and out of the grip of death, humankind—and paradigmatically the baptized—get to go first, get to taste and see that Jesus is Resurrection and Life. Baptisms have been celebrated for centuries on Lazarus Saturday, and by a matching sacramental logic, in the Western churches, catechumens preparing for baptism have been entrusted with and formed in this very text, on their way to going down and rising up in Waters at the Easter Vigil.

So, let this morning be our Lazarus Day. And, in keeping with the congregation's charism of faith in and through the arts—already vividly expressed in the pieces freshly provided by many gifted folk of St. Martin now arrayed along the stations of the cross which will center and stretch our hearts this evening in a special service at 5:00 pm—I offer this painting. I'd like to ask, before description or commentary of any kind, that we simply take it in, even better enter into it, with deep breathing

and with a gaze of wonder and contemplation, a kind of visio divina, if you will. Consider the emotions it may evoke. Consider which figure, which characterization you may be identifying with most strongly. Consider, even, where you might place yourself, what you might be feeling or doing, if you were invited into the scene. (And, may I suggest that we not be too analytical, or too pious.)

As you do this, in a paced way, I will read compact portions of holy scripture, as a sort of gentle belling or tuning fork to align our attention.

Pay attention and come to me,
listen, that you may have life.

The hour is coming when all who
are in the tombs will hear his voice.

The last enemy to be destroyed is death,
for he subjected everything under his feet.

Wake up, sleeper, and rise from the dead,
and Christ will give you light.

Here is Lazarus. His absolutely fixed, wide-eyed stare.

Riveted on a serene Jesus. Lazarus: Stunned. Grateful.

Awed. Barely believing. A bony hand outstretched in

astonishment, in beseeching—now what?

Here is Martha. Her entire body inclining toward, her

ready hands reaching for, her eyes already full of soothing

for, her brother. Near. Intent. Unafraid. Merciful. Bathed
in, surrounded by, white, by light.

And there is a Power Person, in the archway, richly
attired. With hard eyes appraising, scouring Jesus.

Distant. Guarded. Threatened. Hands hidden.

I'm grateful for your bearing with these fragments of
perspective—yours are surely stirred by the same Spirit,
are fruits of the same Spirit, are intimations of the Holy for
shaping your—and perhaps also your neighbor's—heart,
for shaping our collective living out of the gospel, as we
may share them...and I encourage you to do so, later.

One further word—this painting depicts what it means for

Christians, if I may say so these days without pride or
cynicism, to be woke. Yup, I said it! “Awake sleeper, and

rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light” is an

ancient antiphon, drawn from Ephesians, sung at

baptisms. To be woke, for us, for Christians, is to be

made awake to the unquenchable desire of God to work

life in the face of death, in the face of all death-dealing,

violent and falsifying powers; made awake

to Jesus, to Jesus's whole life and whole ministry, and

especially to Jesus's own self-giving, self-emptying love

in the cross, just up ahead for us. Awake to the Spirit's

sometimes soft murmuring, sometimes potent swirling, as in Ezekiel, to mend and to re-make, to inbreathe and to empower a people toward transformation, and for the faithful work of service in God's new creation.

“LAZARUS!”

It turned out that I heard Mary that day, as many of the staff had a kindly laugh, soul-deep. What Mary, bless her, could not have known—or did she?—was that my bumbling thru those darned plastic door strips into that devoted company preparing bagfuls of daily bread, came just a few months into my own spirit-draining, vocation-dismantling, careening descent into depression. Even then, I could say, right up to the moment she called out— —I could say that I felt...barely alive. When Mary called across that basement hall— LAZARUS!—I was at once...stunned. grateful. awed. barely believing. Most of us, I reckon, come to times and seasons when we are thrust into an abyss, when we are bound up in winding sheets, of one kind or another. Cocooned. Sealed off. Undone. Paralyzed. Those hard times: times of profound rejection, suffocating injustice, unspeakable

loss, breathtaking failure, devastating illness—yours or another's dear to you. Mercy! And, in faith, we can also confess—we do confess, every week—there are also times when we have dug ourselves way too deep, and cannot climb out. Mercy!

The good news today, on our Lazarus Day, is: Jesus is Resurrection and Life, the very first words of blessed assurance heard in the introit anthem at Frank Griswold's funeral service. The good news is that Jesus summons us, in fact, to that Risen Life every day in our baptisms, and particularly, savingly, urgently, fiercely in those times when we may be wrapped in shroud, when we may be plunged in the very depths, as we cry in Psalm 130, by calling us up and out, up and out, by an unshakeable, ever re-creating love of God. Called out of darkness into marvelous light, by Jesus, and by our Marys, we then can patiently unbind one another, heal one another, nourish one another, bless one another, too, and all those, near and far, whose lives we tenderly touch in ministry.

Like in a food pantry on the west side of Chicago.

Or here at St. Martin, today, and here again, tomorrow.

AMEN.