

5 Lent A

March 26, 2023

St. Patrick

Jesus comes face to face with death in this Lenten Sunday's Gospel. It's a family he loved—that of Lazarus, Mary and Martha.

As a priest, I have also come face to face with death—with people whom I cherish and love. To be with them in this last earthly passage of their lives is, for me a priest, a privilege and a sacred trust (1). They also teach me about making such a passage.

Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus. So have I at the sacred time with those whom I love have crossed over into eternity.

His name is Zachary. At the age of four he came with his parents from Pennsylvania as a patient at St. Jude's. I got to know them closely. When his oncologist met with Zachary, telling him that he would die soon, his parents asked that I be present.

At the parish Zachary's doctor is a longtime parishioner and usher at the Saturday night Mass. Zachary loved to accompany him as he went down the aisle with the basket to take up the collection. The Saturday before Thanksgiving, Zachary was near death. He told his parents he wanted to go to Mass that evening. So, as the offertory gifts were brought up to me, Zachary's parents brought the gifts with their son to me in front of the altar. The father rolled the pole with the IV attached to Zachary's arm.

On Thanksgiving afternoon, Zachary died in the arms of his Mom. I was there, leading prayer, with the parents.

After his funeral, his Mom gave me one of his small toy tractors. Eighteen years later, it's still on the table next to my prayer chair.

Friends: Our churches, including St. Pat's, are full each Ash Wednesday. We all want those ashes smeared on our forehead. We want to hear those blunt words of the church: **“Remember, you are dust and unto dust you shall become.”**

About three years ago I got a phone message from a deacon at another parish where I served. He knew I loved Bea, and he told me she, well into her 80s, would probably be dying within the month. Soon after that, I went to visit Bea and bring

her Communion. On her kitchen table was her open Bible. It wasn't for show. She prayed with the Scriptures daily. She and Jesus were close. Her life wasn't easy. She had a son in prison.

I gave her Communion and we prayed. When we embraced as I left, I think both of us knew it would be our last time. A couple of weeks later, I got the call. That morning a caregiver came to assist Bea in getting dressed. When she went into her bedroom, Bea was found kneeling beside her bed, her hands folded...and her head slumped on the bed. She died as she was praying.

Jesus taught clearly: **“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”** Then, Jesus piercingly questioned the grieving sister, **“Martha, do you believe this?”**

Many years ago, a parishioner dying of cancer was waiting for death. Her husband was keeping vigil with her.

Then she broke the silence and asked her husband to telephone someone and ask her to visit her in her hospital room. Her husband went out, puzzled. That woman whom he called and his wife had been close friends. Then, they had a serious “falling out,” and had not talked with one another since. Soon after the husband made the call, that person came. The dying wife asked her husband to wait out in the hall. The two women talked for some time. When the visitor left, the husband returned to his wife's bedside. She said, “We reconciled. I'm at peace now.” A few hours later, she died.

That parishioner had prayed the Lord's Prayer so many times. It finally settled in her soul: **“Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”**

Making this Lenten pilgrimage with us, Jesus our forerunner turns around and presses us for an answer: **“Do you believe this—that I am the resurrection and life—and whoever believes in me, even though they die, will live?”**

Answer Jesus from the heart. Answer him. If we do, it changes everything.

(1) See Cole Hartin, “Assisted Suicide and the Cure of Souls,” *Commonweal* (March 2023), pp. 34-37, at 34.

General Intercessions

March 26, 2023

5th Sunday of Lent

You still the tumult of the peoples: Calm the storms of violence and fear in our midst and throughout the world; we pray to you, O Lord—

You govern the world with justice: help us address deceitful practices, structural racism, and exploitation of those who are vulnerable; we pray to you, O Lord—

You spent forty days in the wilderness: teach us to contemplate your presence in nature, and prosper efforts to reverse climate change; we pray to you, O Lord—

You healed the sick: give strength to those who are ill—in mind or body; we pray to you, O Lord—

You bind us together in tragedy: console and strengthen those suffering from the tornadoes, and give eternal peace to those killed; we pray to you, O Lord—

You are the Resurrection and Life: raise up all who have died, especially Bishop *Fernand Cheri*, *Zena Brooks*, and *Lorraine*

Sullivan; and Art Schoembs, on the 8th anniversary of his death; we pray to you, O Lord—