



## THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

MARCH 29, 2020

**“CHOOSE TO FLOWER”**

### JOHN 11: 1-45

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Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.”

When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, and then he said to his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.”

“But Rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?”

Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world’s light. It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light.”

After he had said this, he went on to tell them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.”

His disciples replied, “Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.” Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”

Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.



“Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

“Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. “The Teacher is here,” she said, “and is asking for you.” When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. “Where have you laid him?” he asked.

“Come and see, Lord,” they replied.

Jesus wept.

Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”

But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. “Take away the stone,” he said.

“But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.”

Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”

So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”



When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

## SERMON

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As deb and I were walking the dogs around the block last week, we came upon a newly planted sapling on a neighbor’s grassy median. There was a protective cardboard casing around the bottom of the slender trunk with a word in large pink lettering: flowering.

It reminds me that when martin Luther was asked what he would do if he knew the world was ending tomorrow, he replied: “plant a tree.”

Flowering has to do with being in the prime of life. In the height of one’s glory.

In the midst of COVID 19, one of our neighbors had the audacity to plant a flowering tree.

This question faces each of us each day: do we choose death or do we choose to flower?

Lazarus has been buried in a cave for four days.

In the ancient world, caves are special places where sacred experience occurs.

In Greece, Zeus was said to have been born and raised in a cave.

Liturgies devoted to Demeter, the mother goddess, were celebrated in caves.

Christian legend says that the stable in which Christ was born was, in fact, a cave.

That Jesus taught the disciples the Lord’s Prayer in a cave.

That Mary, the mother of Jesus, was buried in a cave.

That the revelation to John on the island of Patmos happened in a cave.

A return to the cave at death is a symbolic return to God as our parent who gave us birth and to whom we return in order to be born again.

And we’ve been confined to our cave, haven’t we?



In the man cave or the woman cave. The family cave. The cave of our home.

Spiritually, we are being pressed into the cave of our soul, our inner life.

And, like Lazarus, likely we are beginning to stink.

In fact, before this sermon started coming to me, deb told me to go take a shower because I was beginning to stink.

But the stink goes deeper. The stink of our worries, our fear. Perhaps some of us have fallen into the stink of depression. Certainly, many carry the odor of loneliness and isolation. Sadness or hopelessness.

As a manic society, we usually keep ourselves on the go. Most families have the longest conversations in the SUV on the way to some kid activity. We run every which way. We stay busy and productive. Because being productive has been how we value our worth.

Psychologically, this is one of the reasons why there is a call to get us back to work. Few are able to comfortably just be.

And so, have we become human doings rather than human beings?

Even when we stop our activity, we can stay distracted by our phones, our computers, Netflix, ESPN, and reruns of Andy Griffith.

And so, we may just now be getting in touch with our inner stench.

How our minds never stop. What the Buddhists call monkey mind. Our minds jumping from thought to feeling to fearful fantasy to our to-do list to the ache in our back to feeling hungry and then anxious and then concerned about our weight and, oh yes, we better call...Saul.

We can really smell up the place. I know I can.

And the cave can be a scary place. Darkness. Dripping water. Bats. Creepy, crawly things. Cold. Claustrophobic. And in his cave, after four days, Lazarus smells pretty scary....

But the cave is also a place of spiritual transformation, a place of flowering.

In my second congregation, Brad Warner drew a comic strip of his perspective on the process of flowering. Millvale artist, Mike Zickefoose, has reproduced his imagining of the images.



The first frame shows an empty field with a cowpie.

The second frame? A cowpie with a graphic showing that, in the hot sun, it is starting to smell to high heaven.

In the third frame, tiny sprouts break through.

And, in succeeding frames, the tiny sprout slowly grows into beautiful flowers.

From the smelly, stinky mess comes the flowering.

And we are in a mess.

But we are in the mess together.

And in this smelly mess, what might flowering look like?

But first, what does flowering not look like?

Flowering does not look like death.

One of Sigmund Freud's initial insights is that, while we have an instinct for life, what he called Eros, we also have a death instinct, Thanatos, a destructive energy urging us toward extinction.

If we rewrote this story with the death instinct front and center, Jesus would call Lazarus out of the cave, hand him \$1,000 bucks and tell him to get back to work because the economy suffered while he was in the cave.

In the starkest terms, Jesus states that one cannot serve God and mammon. Mammon being a biblical word for the debasing influence of material wealth.

I don't know, like suggesting that grandparents should risk dying in order to keep the economy running.

Death is making sure that corporations, which the bible calls principalities and powers, survive and thrive with billions of dollars of support while choosing the death of not forgiving student debt, not providing basic snap benefits for the poor, not providing health care for our citizens, and stalling on providing necessary medical supplies for our overwhelmed doctors and nurses.



What COVID 19 exposes is how often our choices are and continue to be for death. China, thought by some to be a godless country. India, a Hindu nation and devalued by some because of it, and Italy, home of the mafia can all flatten the viral curve in order to save its citizens despite damage to their economies. But our supposed Christian nation might choose to value the almighty dollar over your amazing life?

Being in a cave clearly is not the only thing that creates stench.

Russell more, the president of the southern Baptist convention writes, "it's true that a depression would cause untold human suffering for people around the world, hitting the poor the hardest. Still, each human life is more significant than a trillion-dollar gross national product."

Our human bonds are more precious than stock market bonds. Staying safe is more valuable than what we have in our safes. Don't we treasure our interest in our loved ones over the interest earned by our cds? Saving one another is more important than our savings accounts.

Each of us is created in the image of God.

And when only one of us dies—Lazarus—Jesus weeps.

God in the flesh weeps over the death of one human being.

For our God is a personal God. A God of relationship. A God for whom each life is sacred. Each life a gift. A seed meant to flower and flourish.

Wendell berry told us long ago that the great challenge of our time would be whether we would see life as a machine or as a miracle....

As someone who has experienced sudden traumatic death with both my parents, I have carried that sorrow that anguish, that loss, that suffering for over forty-five years.

We will not be able to total up the sorrow, anguish, loss, and suffering that would fall on us as our loved ones die alone in nursing homes, in intensive care units, in makeshift tents. We are all connected and even the loss of one person to this kind of traumatic death reverberates through countless human souls. Our entire nation will be traumatized.



As the fictional police detective Hieronymus borsch states: everybody counts or no one counts....

Legend has it that after the crucifixion, Lazarus went to Gaul with his sister, Mary, where he became the first bishop of Marseilles.

He went from being a stinking corpse in a cave to flowering as a person of faith....

And how might we flower in this time?

First, let's take a lesson from my friend, Steve Bart field's dog, Annie. here she is reading about the benefits of both barking and howling.

Keep a sense of humor, my brothers and sisters. People with a sense of humor have a better sense of life.

Second, in this pandemic, call on your wisdom. Life can look like death and death can look like life. We each have to sort it out.

Sure, spring break sounded like fun, but it brought illness to those who could not face the darkness of these days.

Staying home is an act of love.

And Pittsburgh, yinz guys are doing a great job!

Third, welcome what we call the dark emotions. Carl Jung reminds us that "we do not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious."

We tend to be afraid of the darker emotions, but there is a close relationship between "individual heartbreak and the broken heartedness of the world."

Miriam green span suggests that "the best thing to do when fear has a neck hold on you is to befriend someone who lives in real and constant fear. The best thing to do when you are flattened by despair is to spend time in a community where despair is daily bread. The best thing to do when sadness has your arms twisted behind your back is to sit down with the saddest child you know and say, "Tell me about it. I have all day."

Parents and grandparents, protect your children from too much information and be sure to speak to them on their level.

I remember the little boy who asked, "Daddy, where did I come from?" The father got all flustered and began to explain about the birds and the bees.

After he was done, he asked his son, "so does that make sense?"



“I guess so,” his son replied, “but Billy said he came from UPMC and I just wondered about me.”

Speaking of how we talk to our children about the current situation, I want to suggest that you do not spend time glued to the news.

We are undergoing a collective trauma. Trauma simply means an event where we cannot take it in emotionally, psychologically, spiritually all at one time.

It is injurious to spirit and soul to fill ourselves with every detail, every death, and every new crisis.

Take a break.

Perhaps look at the news in the morning, at lunch, and in the evening. Otherwise, let it go.

Fourth, deepen into intimacy with those you love. The word intimacy comes from an older word meaning inmost. Now is the time to talk about the important matters. Love, what is meaningful, spirituality and death all are connected to soul. This can be an intimate soulful time for us.

Out of the depths comes flowering of relationship.

Fifth, play. Here we have Paige and drew, two of CLC’s children dancing it up as they watched the service last Sunday.

Unless we become as children, we will not see the kingdom of God, says Jesus.

Find ways to play.

Sixth, we flower as we care for others.

In order to care for others, we have partnered with our members, shale school system teachers, element church, our Millvale police department to purchase a significant number of shop n save gift cards. Stop by our office Monday thru Friday, from 9-1 and see patty Ellison, our administrative assistant. We want to help.

Finally, the story of the death and raising of Lazarus tells us that new life can only emerge when there has been a death of the old life.

The ancient church called this mortification. This points to an experience that every soul must pass through if it is going to be able to transcend its limited and broken state.





Lazarus represents each of us who must pass through death and burial to flower into new life.

This is why Jesus weeps for us. For these experiences of mortification—that we are experiencing together, each in our own way—are inevitably filled with a pain, a grief, a loss, a suffering that cannot be evaded.

The way to all new life, all flowering is through the darkness of the cave.

So, hold on. Holy week and Easter are just around the corner.

Hold on. There is hope because Jesus Christ has joined his life to ours. Allow yourself to flower in this mess. That is what god wants from us. That is what God offers us.

We suffer together. We will flower together.

## **SERMON SONG**

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*THE SECRET O' LIFE* BY JAMES TAYLOR