

“I Am”

John 11:1-45

5th Sunday of Lent, Year A

13 March 2005

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¹Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” ⁴But when Jesus heard it, he said, **“This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”** ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, **“Let us go to Judea again.”** ⁸The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” ⁹Jesus answered, **“Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.”** ¹¹After saying this, he told them, **“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.”** ¹²The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, **“Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”** ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” ²³Jesus said to her, **“Your brother will rise again.”** ²⁴Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” ²⁵Jesus said to her, **“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”** ²⁷She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

²⁸When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, **“Where have you laid him?”** They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, **“Take away the stone.”** Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, **“Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”** ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus

looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Prayer.

I have a dear friend by the name of Bill Haesner, who lives about 5 miles outside of Moravia, New York. Bill and I came to know each other a few years after the death of his 12 year old son due to leukemia. The church in Moravia reached out to his family in their need, and Bill had a desire to give something back. So he volunteered his charter boat and a week of his time each summer to teach kids from my fishing camp at Casowasco to fish for lake trout on Owasco Lake.

When he isn't running charters, Bill is an independent logger and wood lot manager. He knows more about trees than just about anyone I know. He has an eye for trees, especially in his specialty: hardwoods that are in high demand in the European market. Bill will walk a piece of land with a spray can in hand and identify the specific trees he is looking for. He will take measurements, make estimates, and run some numbers to establish a value of a tree. Some of them will bring \$10,000, or more. He will mark them with an X down near the base. It's important to mark them low, that way the land owner will be able to confirm that only the trees that were marked are trees that were harvested. When the weather is good and the ground is firm, Bill and his hired man will bring in their heavy equipment, harvest the marked trees, skid and load them into their log truck, take them to the rail siding, and load them into spotted rail cars. Each log will be barcoded and itemized, so the international broker will be able to make the transaction, delivery, and payment in a timely fashion.

It's a fascinating thing to me to walk through a grove of trees where some have been marked for harvesting. They aren't rotted trees. They are majestic, beautiful, tall and proud. Yet, an X identifies those that will be taken. One could dwell on the sadness of a condemned tree. Or, one could imagine the possibilities of fine, European woodworking, the future life and possibilities those trees possessed.

I have been reading and learning a lot recently about terminal illnesses. For example, what are the ethics that need to be considered for genetic testing and early confirmation of tragic or terminal diseases? If one learns that they have a genetic certainty of contracting and dying from Huntington's Disease, for example, will that person suffer from workplace discrimination? Have their health insurance pulled out from underneath them? Be unable to qualify for a mortgage?

How certain is a sure thing? Perhaps the genetic testing only indicates a predisposition towards contracting a terminal disease, not certainty. Perhaps a person with liver cancer, AIDS, or Alzheimer's dies of another disease first, for instance, of a heart attack or stroke.

I found it interesting that a study was recently conducted of a group of people who were

genetically identified that 50% of them had the risk of developing a fatal disease, but only about 25% of them opted to be tested, to learn if they would die a painful and agonizing death. 75% of the people didn't want to know. The fear of knowing was too much to comprehend.

When you have a terminal diagnosis, you are treated differently. People begin to speak in hushed voices around you. Others will talk about you right in front of your face, as if you weren't even in the room! Family and friends don't come around like they used to. Hospitals and skilled care facilities are too often avoided. At the very time in life when we need to be surrounded by the love and support of family and friends, too often the dying are left in isolation to die alone.

A terminal diagnosis is like being marked with an X, spray painted on your feet.

It is really a choice we make – when we see someone marked by an X, will we begin the sorrow and mourning prematurely - before death, or will we work to bring dignity to the life that remains, and a forward thinking attitude that is filled with promise and hope of eternal life?

Our Gospel lesson for this day is about a person marked with an X. Lazarus, a friend of Jesus who lived in Bethany of Judea, just outside of Jerusalem, had fallen ill – deathly ill – and his two sisters Mary and Martha had sent word to Jesus that he was needed. Their brother was sick and would soon die. “Come quickly,” they begged.

It probably took an extra day or two for word to get to him, for Jesus was working in Galilee, in the north. One would expect that Jesus, full of mercy and grace, hearing that one was in need, that He would respond immediately. This wasn't the case. Though his friend was dying, Jesus dallied an extra two days. Then “Jesus told them plainly, **“Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”** (John 11:14b-15).

Four days Lazarus had laid in the tomb. Four days of mourning, and wrapping the body in oil and spices, held together with linen. Four days of guests filing through the receiving line. And we think 2-4 and 7-9 are a lot!

We all know that those tears and grief are hard to go through. They take it right out of you. And along comes the tardy Jesus, complete with his band of followers. Can you imagine what was going through Mary and Martha's minds? You can hear the pain in her voice when Martha asks Jesus “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Lazarus had been marked for death. And the one person who could have made a difference was nowhere to be found. He was like Jeb Steward and his Confederate Calvary AWOL, trotting around the countryside while the Battle of Gettysburg waged on. Jesus was deeply moved, grieved over the death of his friend, and shared the loss with his sisters. “When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” (John 11:33).

It appeared as if death had made the choice for them – for Jesus and His disciples. They came into Bethany and the environment was death, sorrow and mourning. What more was there to do?

But Jesus understood the lay of the land differently. He was not to linger, to make excuses for his absence, mourn or rend his clothing any more than a sincere expression of his

love. He look at the tomb differently. “Lazarus, come out!” he commanded! (John 11:43) The future was far more grand, far more filled with potential and life. The possibility of something far more vital and alive exists beyond death.

Indeed, to the Christian, we understand that death is but a transition – from life, to death, to new life, eternal life - of promise and potential of living eternally in God's heavenly kingdom. “Where now O death,” we ask, “is thy sting?”

If Martha had only taken the time to look ... Certainly she would have seen it just a short time later. When she gathered with the other women at the foot of the cross of Jesus, she would have looked up and seen the X that had marked Jesus from birth; the X on Jesus' feet that revealed to one and all, that he was marked like a tree for harvesting; that he was marked for death like one suffering and ready to die; that he was marked just like Lazarus had been, and now it was his turn to be swallowed whole.

And so it is with Lent, this awful, terrible season leading up to the death and burial of Jesus. Each of us started out this journey on Ash Wednesday with an X marked with ashes on our foreheads.

Coincidence? I don't think so.

Each of us are also marked with an X, as certain as if it were spray painted in neon on our feet. Every one of us are marked for death, the same death that Lazarus experienced in his tomb those four days, the same death that took the breath out of Jesus during his three day descent. The fact is that our flesh one day will return to dust and the bodies we once inhabited will be forever gone.

What shall we do about it? Will we mourn our eventual demise? Wallow in self-pity and sorrow? Pull the covers over our heads and wait for the grim reaper to come?

OF COURSE NOT! Jesus tells us that there is another option. We can choose another road. We are free to enjoin our suffering and death with the suffering and death of Jesus, with the knowledge, hope, and faith that new life awaits us. New life is prepared for each one of our souls. For everyone who has had the faith to speak the name of Jesus, a place has been set at the messianic feast.

The X is the sign of the cross for the Christian. It is a sign of victory! A symbol of salvation to all those who look upon Jesus and recognize that he bears the same mark. Just as a tree is transformed into beautiful hardwood furniture, so too are we delivered into a whole new, beautiful world – God's kingdom we've come to know as “eternal life.”

Those who saw and witnessed to the resurrection of Lazarus believed in Jesus. They saw the X.

Take a good look at yourself this day. Can you see your own X? Can you see the cross that has been given to you?

The Word of the Lord, as it has come to me this day. Thanks be to God. Amen.