

Jesus says difficult things sometimes. He says things that are hard to hear. And we have one of those sayings in our Gospel reading today. Sadly, we are not good listeners—especially to speech that really matters. So many problems in the home—and in society—originate as failure to listen. When someone says something thought provoking—something important—the easiest thing is to ignore it.

One theologian said it this way, “We are often unable to tell people what they need to know because they want to know something else.” I think this might be why Jesus spoke as He did. His sayings are provocative. They require something of us—as His hearers. His hard saying cut through our stubborn thinking—or our lack of thinking.

There are so many examples. Let me give you just one. And this is one we will take up on Good Friday. I hope you will set aside the time—and make the effort to listen on this holiest of holy days. His comment is all about what the cross means for us.

In Matthew 10, Jesus says, “Whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” This is fundamental to what it means to follow Jesus—to be a Christian. It is a fundamental response to the cross of Jesus Christ. And yet, we just pretend that Jesus didn’t say such a thing. And we live our lives however we please.

My goal in today’s sermon today is to get us wrestling with these kinds of statements from Jesus—even to prepare us for Good Friday. This is what the name *Israel* means, by the way, “one who wrestles with God.” This name comes out of the Jacob story, who wrestled with this divine figure—the preincarnate Christ—in my view. And in the end, Jacob comes out with a limp. Wrestling with God is dangerous. It will not leave us unchanged. But there are also great blessings—as we will see.

And that is exactly what we should do with the difficult things Jesus says. Don’t ignore them because they are too difficult. Don’t reject them or explain them away. Don’t get offended and walk away. Embrace them. Wrestle with them. Struggle with them—until the Spirit—at work in His Word—and in His Church—gives you some sense of what Jesus intends. And I think you will find that His words will transform you—and redeem you.

But it is hard to beat today’s comments for difficulty. Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.”

With these words, Jesus is talking with his good friend Martha of Bethany. Sisters Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus, hold a special place in John’s Gospel. It is their stories that take us right up to the edge of Palm Sunday. And it is this story that crystallizes the plot that will take Jesus to Good Friday.

We have been talking about the seven words of Jesus from the cross on Wednesdays in Lent. Similarly, there are seven signs in John’s Gospel. It all begins with Jesus turning water into wine at Cana in Galilee. And the seventh sign is the Lazarus miracle that we hear in our text. This is also one of Jesus’ seven “I Am” statements in John. “I am the resurrection and the life.” And with these statements, Jesus uses deliberate language from Exodus 14, as God met with Moses at the burning bush. The Old Testament name for God—Yahweh—is

grammatically tied to this language of “I Am.” The same verb forms each word. With each one, Jesus makes a claim for His own divinity. He is God in the flesh.

But this is a hard saying because Jesus is saying it after Lazarus is already dead. Now, we heard the text. We know what happens with Lazarus. Jesus brings him out of the tomb—alive—restored. I hope this is still as shocking to us as it was to Mary and Martha. And this is not some myth. The Pharisees certainly don’t take it as such. And I want to talk about their reaction.

But first, it is important to acknowledge that Jesus’ statement here seems contradictory. Jesus suggests that even though His disciples might die—like Lazarus—they will also live again. Good enough, He affirms the resurrection of all flesh at the end. And then in the very next breath, He says that the one who believes in Him will never die. And this, of course, is problematic because Lazarus believed in Jesus. And as Jesus says these words, Lazarus is dead.

I use these words of Jesus at funerals. They are right there in our liturgy—twice even. And I often wonder what people make of them. I am a little surprised that I have not been confronted at some point.

So which is it? Will Jesus’ disciples die or will they not? Where is this eternal life that Jesus speaks about? The easy way out is to reject this statement. It doesn’t make sense. For that matter, the miracle doesn’t make much sense either. Jesus will raise Lazarus from the dead. And it is truly incredible. But in the very next chapter, the chief priests put out a hit on Lazarus. They plot to kill him—again—I guess we should say. His life has become an inconvenient truth for them.

But like with most of Jesus’ signs—we demand too little of them—rather than too much. We hear Jesus changing water into wine—and wish He would do the same for us. It would save us a lot of money. And in thinking of them like this, we miss the point entirely. Again, these are signs. They aren’t about making life easier for followers of Christ. Instead, they point us to something infinite.

So, where does the Lazarus miracle point us? I hope you realize—that is the right question. It is what Jesus wants His followers to ask. This is the miracle that ushers us into Holy Week—that takes us to the cross—to the resurrection. So it becomes clear in John’s Gospel that what Jesus does for Lazarus here foreshadows Jesus’ passion.

But here, it is also important to go back and grasp what the Scriptures say about death from the beginning. And what we find is that death is separation. Mary and Martha experienced it. Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. But primarily, death is separation of the soul from the body. Scripture speaks of this as the first death.

In Revelation 2, Jesus speaks to the Church in Smyrna. We have touched on these chapters on Wednesdays. And His words in Revelation help us to understand this difficult saying of Jesus. It is almost like he speaks them with Lazarus in mind. He says, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.”

Here, we discover that there is a second death. And it is what Paul describes in 2 Thessalonians 1, “They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the

presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.” The second death is separation from God. It is being stuck with our sinful nature for all eternity. Sometimes we call this hell or the lake of fire.

And this is the death Jesus addresses when he says, “Everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” God delivers us from the second death through faith in Jesus. And this is far more important than what will happen to Lazarus on earth. Like I said, his life is probably more difficult after this miracle. But then again, he also has a unique taste of what Jesus has come to do. He has seen beyond the grave and come back. Something none of us can claim.

Similar to Revelation 2, in Revelation 20, John says, “Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.”

Here, and in this context, we find that not only are there first and second deaths, there are also first and second resurrections. All four need to be defined. But it is also important to note that the Easter story—and its gospel promise—are woven into this passage in Revelation just as they are in John 11.

In just two weeks, we are going to confess that Christ is alive beyond the cross and grave. And He gives life to those He has chosen for Himself. As Jesus says, “Because I live, you also will live.” And “Anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also.” Like I suggested with the opening difficult saying of Jesus, following Jesus matters for us now, just as it will matter for our eternity. The 23rd Psalm comes to mind for me in this way.

The first resurrection refers to the beginning of spiritual life for us. Notice that the second death—eternal separation from God—has no hold on such people. This resurrection is the moment we come to faith—when baptismal waters wash over us—when we are regenerated, and sanctification begins. Christ opens our eyes to the reality of His kingdom and pulls up out of the grave of sin and selfishness. This is the real beginning of life in the fullest sense of the word.

And those saints who have experienced the first death—physical death—wait with Christ in paradise. They await that second resurrection—the resurrection of the body at the last day. In the intermediate state, the priesthood of believers continues in everlasting songs of praise. They sing. They pray. They worship around the throne. Christ is their King—enthroned in heavenly splendor—and they see Him as He is.

So, the first resurrection takes place on earth, in time. It is what Jesus speaks about with Nicodemus—in our reading just a few weeks ago—a new birth from above—in water and the Spirit. It takes place in the Church age in which we live. It is spiritual, not physical. The second resurrection awaits Christ’s final return. But all of this means we are blessed. So, being free from the second death is central to our salvation.

So, the first death is physical death—when our body and our souls are separated. The second death is spiritual death—eternal separation from God. The first resurrection is the new life of holy Baptism and regeneration. The second resurrection is the resurrection of the body on the last day leading to eternity.

And it is with this in mind that Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” And now, we start to get what He means.

It is interesting. Jesus finishes His statement here—again, while Lazarus is still dead. And Jesus asks Martha at this point, “Do you believe this?” It is a tough question when your brother rests in a grave. But I love her answer. It is the answer of faith. And I hope it is ours as well. She said to Him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”

John wants us to identify with those who finish in faith. We dealt with Nicodemus before. And now, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, all go through this great difficulty and still trust in Jesus. They believe His signs. They look to Him as their Christ—their Savior and Lord. John wants the same for us.

But John doesn’t want us to miss the reaction of the Pharisees and the Chief Priests either. We get to hear a little of their argument. They don’t ignore Jesus—as so many do today. They are smart enough not to respond with indifference. They aren’t bored by Jesus. Although their reaction is also foolish.

The Pharisees and Chief Priests oppose Him. They recognize that Jesus is dangerous to them—to their way of life—their way of thinking. I love that even in his opposition—Caiaphas—the high priest—who will see Jesus executed—can’t help but prophesy what Jesus is doing. His words give us hope—even as they expose his pettiness and condemnation. “It is better for you that one man should die for the people, than the whole nation should perish.”

They intend to kill Jesus because of what He has done. For them, He is only a threat—only a problem. Jesus and His signs—even this sign of resurrection—are contrary to what their lives are all about—their place and their nation. It’s a sad response.

So how about us? How will we respond? We have every reason to believe all of this actually happened. We have the sign of Lazarus coming out of the tomb. We have the sign of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And we have heard all that John tells us here and in Revelation about the first and second deaths—and the first and second resurrections.

And we have the words of Jesus Himself—as difficult as they may be. Jesus says some hard things. But He is always worth hearing. And we can find great hope in what He says. So, think on such things as you prepare for Holy Week. Don’t just forget everything you heard today and move on. All of this is just too important.

Grapple with Jesus’ “I Am” statement and answer Jesus’ question. Let it trouble you a little today. And let it lead to faith. “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+