

Homily for the Funeral Mass of Margaret Brockie

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“I am the Resurrection. If anyone believes in me, even though he die he will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25-26) — a good question in a time like this! These words come from the story of the Raising of Lazarus from the Dead, in John’s Gospel. It is a remarkable story in that it confronts Death head on, as we are forced to here today. It doesn’t try to soften it or downplay it — as we are want these days, by using a euphemism like, ‘He has passed away.’ (c.f.: John 11:11) Instead it insists baldly, “Lazarus is dead.” (John 11:15) As the story goes, Jesus gets a message telling him, “Lord, the man you love is ill.” (John 11:3) Then, instead of going to his sick friend, Jesus deliberately continues on with what he’s doing. And so his friend dies before he gets there.

When Jesus does eventually get there, both of the dead man’s sisters reproach him saying, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”(John 11:21, 33) When someone we love dies, that’s what it feels like: Absence and Terrible Loss; where there was someone we love, now there is nothing. In our hurting, we too, can find ourselves saying along with Martha and Mary, “Lord, if you had been here, they would not have died.” In death, God seems terribly absent. What this Gospel story is telling us is that, in such times, it’s alright to reproach God. Death — in its pain, in its finality, and in its inevitability — it takes us to the very edge of belief, and we are tempted to walk away. In our hurting we can say, “How can a God of love let this happen?” and by which we really mean, if we dig down a little, “How could you let this happen to me?”

In the absence of our loved one, we can feel the ache of being unloved; where there was fullness, now there is emptiness. Faced with the suffering of one we know, whose loved one has died, we can easily chime in with the chorus that supported Mary in her grief: “Could he not have prevented this man’s death?” (John 11:38) This may not be the best way to support someone in their time of loss, but it is a question that does arise. In the face of death, God can seem just as powerless, just as helpless, as we ourselves ... and we are left feeling even more so terribly alone: there is nothing to do, and nothing that can be done. Death is the one issue that really challenges our belief in God.

Jesus is no different: when death is before his eyes, he is one with us. We are told, ‘At the sight of her tears, and those of the Jews that followed her, Jesus said in great distress, with a sigh that came straight from the heart, “Where have you put him?” And they say, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus wept; and the Jews said, “See how much he loved him!” ... Still sighing, Jesus reached the tomb; it was a cave with a stone to close the opening.’ (John 11:33ff) Death and funerals are times of grief and tears. This can be messy, and in it we look a mess, but our tears need to flow, for in them we express our love. The reason why death hurts is because of our love: no love, no hurt, no grief, no tears; in them we know the depth of our love. Jesus sighs and weeps; in our grief he is one with us and we with him. It is OK to show our grief; it may hurt like hell, but we need to feel it. But here in the description of Jesus’ grief,

there is another emotion described: At the sight of her tears, Jesus said in great distress, with a sigh that came straight from the heart, “Where have you put him?” ... still sighing he reached the tomb. We suffer here a little from the translation. What it really says is that Jesus “greatly moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.” What this ‘greatly troubled’ means is that Jesus was greatly agitated by fear and dread, so that he lost his inner calm; we might say he was angry. Anger is one of the emotions we need to deal with in our grief; we must expect it and not be put off by it, as though somehow it’s not proper. Our anger has something to tell us, and we need to feel it to find out what it is saying. It’s not bad to be angry; Jesus was angry — bad is a moral category, and feeling are just feeling, neither good nor bad; it may not be nice to feel angry, but it’s not bad.

So, why was Jesus angry? In our own grief, we feel angry because we are hurting. We look round to see why we are hurting, and our eyes settle on our loved one — and we blame them for dying and so causing us to feel so terrible. It’s not rational, but then feelings never are! The story reminds us several times that Jesus loved Lazarus. He, too, would have been angry with his friend for dying. But there is a deeper reason for his anger, which we too need to discover in ourselves. This word ‘greatly troubled’ is used in another place in this Gospel, just as he is entering Jerusalem before he is put to death. Jesus says then, “Now my soul is troubled”. (John 12:27) He knows what is going to happen. Nobody wants to die, and Jesus is no different; death is an affront to all the living. When it is shoved in our face, we are not grateful for the reminder. Rather, we are more likely to be angry.

So here for us; so here for Jesus in this story of Lazarus. On his previous visit to Judea, Jesus narrowly escaped being stoned to death. (John 10:31) At this stage in his career Judea had become an unsafe place for him, so he had withdrawn to the other side of the Jordan River, which was like crossing over into another country where he could be safe. While there he gets a message that his dear friend is seriously ill, and they want him to come. Love draws him to go to his friend, even though it means that in so doing he will certainly die. Love triumphs and he goes. Thus, when confronted by the reality of his friend’s death, yes, he weeps; but he also feels angry. Because of his love for his friend, Jesus is now confronted by the reality of his own death, and so he feels angry/greatly troubled in spirit.

Death always confronts us with the reality of our own too-soon-in-coming death. This is something we all need to face up to, whether we want to or not, and it becomes the more pressing the older we get: How do we live knowing that we are going to die; how do we live knowing there is a full-stop just down the road? Now my soul is troubled! But if we’re going to live, we need to answer this question. There are plenty of stock answers, and these may help soothe — but we need to find our own answers, answers that make sense to us, and answers that will only come as we wrestle with our grief. Jesus was greatly troubled in his spirit. Grief is an affair of the spirit, and its answer can only be a spiritual one. Though death may challenge our belief in God, now is not the time to walk away.

As the prophet Isaiah once said: “Whoever walks in darkness, and has no light shining for him, let him trust in the name of YHWH, let him lean on his God.” (Isaiah 51:10) When Jesus reaches the tomb, he asks them to roll away the stone. Martha objects, “Lord by now he will smell; this is the fourth day.” Jesus replies, “Have I not told you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?” (John 11:39-40) Our answer is to be found only by grasping our faith and using it to roll away the

stone and look death in the face in all its disgustingness. The answer lies somewhere between the opening of this tomb and the opening of Jesus' own tomb, at the end of the Gospel — where we are told that, upon entering it, Jesus' beloved disciple 'saw and believed' (John 20:8; 2:12); where, in Luke's Gospel, the message of the tomb is put onto the lips of angels: "Why look among the dead for someone who is alive?" (Luke 24:5)

The story of Lazarus being Raised for the Dead is really a parable, a story that says one thing but is really talking about another. It tells the story of the death of Jesus' much-loved friend. To go to him that he might live, Jesus has to leave his place of safety. To do so is going to cost him his life, but he does it anyway. Thus this story is a story in micro that tells of the much larger story of salvation — in which God, who loves the world so much (John 3:16) that he goes to it because it is in a dance with death, leaves the safety of heaven knowing it will cost him his all (Philippians 2:6-8), but he goes anyway that it might have life. (John 15:13;10:10)

The Salvation story is about life, our life, and how to live. To live we need to come to terms with death. In this we need to find out something about God and who he really is. Margaret is one who went on such a journey. When I went to see her on the day before she died, I overheard her telling all who came, "I'm on a journey"; she knew where she was going. The God she knew as a child was a very censoring God, and very harsh, a God who was always angry. She could not live with such a God, and so she ran away. But there was something about God she could not let go, and which gently drew her back. The God she found on her way back was a very human God, a gentle God, and she resisted any perceived effort that might put her back before that terrible God of her childhood: "I don't believe that [expletive deleted]!" she would say.

And on the way Margaret found out how to live, doing what she could that others might live though at times it cost her dearly. (Genesis 1:27) Towards the end Margaret said to Pat, "I hope your end is as good as mine!" Who can doubt that, in her death, Margaret has gone to the God she now knew — the one who comes at the death of his friend and weeps for her and gives his life for her that she might live. Live well, Margaret my friend.