

What a strange year it has been since last Sunday!

As we have become adept at social distancing, waved and smiled at strangers just because they are members of humanity with us, experienced the adaptations of taped areas on store floors and bank lobby entrance by appointment only,

It seems like time has lengthened – we experience it in a different way.

We wish it would speed up and this virus go away already – but while our vigilance in staying at home, washing our hands, and protecting ourselves and others has influence over the spread of this virus, we cannot control it.

It will run its course. It is temporary.

But until it does, we experience time in a strange way.

Much like Mary, and Martha, and Lazarus.

In the ancient church, the two stories we have heard this morning – the one from the Old Testament, the resurrection of the dry bones in Ezekiel's valley and the other from the New Testament, the raising of Lazarus – are the last before the Holy Week preparation of converts to be baptized at the Easter Vigil.

They point to the heart of the mystery of Christian faith – the death and resurrection of Jesus as the new Adam, the firstborn of God's new creation, the Savior who in dying and rising, conquers death forever and makes possible the resurrection of the whole human race through faith.

These stories, taken together, show us that the Lord God of Israel, the Triune God of Jesus, is one and the same and is the source of all life and all that sustains life.

And for us, that truth is revealed in the person of Jesus.

As we begin the story of Lazarus, Jesus and his disciples get word of their friend's illness, but wait a few days before journeying to Bethany, so that by the time they arrive, Lazarus has been in the tomb 4 days and, as the King James version will put it, "he stinketh."

What a long time – let's say 6 days to allow for travel – what a long time to wait for their friend Jesus to come. Mary and Martha had hoped he would come and heal their brother, prevent his death, turn away this sorrow.

Now they were angry because Jesus did not come right away. Why did he wait? Shouldn't a good pastor drop everything and come right away when called? Shouldn't a friend?

For Mary and Martha, those 6 days were a strange eternity – a mixture of hope and resignation, of preparation for the probable outcome of the disease and the anticipation that the moment would be stayed by the arrival of Jesus.

The outcome is what we hear in Martha's voice and echoed by her sister Mary, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

How was this spoken? Was it in the anger of righteous indignation? Or in tearful lament and grief?

Perhaps both. Those who have grieved understand these mixed emotions.

It is not unlike the feelings many are experiencing right now, as loss of employment, loss of income, loss of health, loss of social contact, make time seem so long and the presence of Jesus so far away.

We hope and lament at the same time.

We grieve and yearn for the future to come quickly at the same time.

We are resigned to the present and preparing for the future with hope.

We are a mess of emotion – like Mary and Martha.

The sisters did not know why their friend delayed, why he allowed them to experience the sorrow of grief.

But we know – because Jesus told his disciples -- It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

This is similar to how Jesus explained the blind man's affliction – and now, he speaks of death itself.

There is a double meaning here. Jesus speaks of Lazarus' death – and goes on to raise him to life, as he healed the blind man.

But Jesus is also speaking of his own death on the cross – that this, too, is for the glory of God so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.

His death will not only provide the means for his glorification in his resurrection from the dead, but also for our participation in his glorification.

When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, Mary and Martha and all their friends and family got to participate in the new life Jesus had given him.

This was a foretaste of the eternal life that Jesus gives in the resurrection of the dead for all who trust him.

The experience of a long arduous time between when they sent for Jesus when Lazarus was gravely ill and when Jesus arrived is now forgotten in the reality of Lazarus walking out of the tomb alive and hearkening to Jesus' voice.

What is amazing to me is not simply that Lazarus walked out of the tomb, but that Jesus' word penetrated the ears of the dead man.

It is true, as the angel Gabriel said to Mary, "No Word is impossible for God."

Where Jesus is present, sinners are forgiven, the deaf hear, the blind see, and the dead are raised to new life.

And that is true today as it was 2000 years ago.

The Lord Jesus is not absent during this coronavirus. He is present in every word of hope and encouragement, in every wave and smile of mutual human acknowledgement, in every instance of prayer and worship, in every cry of grief and anguish, in every sigh of longing and hope, and in every tear that falls from our eyes.

At the times when we feel as though we are in the tomb with Lazarus, Jesus is calling our name to come out.

At the times when we feel like Mary and Martha in grief and uncertainty, he reminds us “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.”

And though time may seem to stretch beyond our limits of endurance, it will never be beyond the persistence of Jesus' presence with us.

For he has promised, “I am with you to the end of the age.” Or as Buzz Lightyear has said, “to infinity and beyond.”

In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.