

**FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT: YEAR A**

Ezekiel 37.1-14

Psalm 130

Romans 8.6-11

John 11.1-45

**MARCH 26, 2023**

St David's Episcopal Church

N. Chesterfield, Virginia

Ruth Partlow

T.S. ELIOT WRITES IN HIS POEM "LITTLE GIDDING":

What we call the beginning is often the end

. . . an end is to make a beginning.

The end is where we start from.

*Little Gidding, Canto V TS Eliot*

IT'S THE FIFTH WEEK OF LENT. THE CHURCH IS MOVING RELENTLESS ON TOWARD HOLY WEEK AND JESUS' DEATH, THE TOMB. EASTER LOOMS ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THOSE THREE DAYS. THIS YEAR, THE GOSPELS ARE PARTICULARLY POWERFUL TESTIMONIES TO WHO JESUS IS – AND WHAT HE IS ABOUT.

- NICODEMUS ARRIVED ONE NIGHT WANTING TO KNOW MORE ABOUT JESUS. HE BECAME A FOLLOWER
- THE SAMARITAN WOMAN MET JESUS AT THE WELL AT SYCHAR AND RUSHED TO TELL EVERYONE SHE HAD FOUND THE MESSIAH.
- THE BLIND MAN'S SIGHT, FULLY RESTORED, CAME TO BELIEVE IN JESUS AS A HEALER AND A MAN FROM GOD.
- JESUS RAISED LAZARUS FROM THE DEAD – A FORETASTE OF WHAT IS TO COME – THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD.

YES, WE ARE MARCHING RELENTLESSLY TOWARD HOLY WEEK, THE CROSS AND THE DEATH OF JESUS.

COULD IT BE THAT WE ARE BEING GIVEN A GLIMPSE IN JOHN'S GOSPEL OF THE HOPE AND LOVE THAT AWAITS US ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TOMB? IS IT NOT A FORETASTE OF GOD'S LOVE AND CARE FOR THE WORLD? – IN SPITE OF ALL THAT BEFALLS US IN OUR DAILY LIVES, GOD IS WORKING ON OUR BEHALF?

TODAY'S GOSPEL IS AN AFFIRMATION AND FORETASTE OF THE RESURRECTION, OF OUR RESURRECTION. IT'S MEANT TO ENCOURAGE ALL WHO FOLLOWED JESUS— MARY, MARTHA, LAZARUS, PETER, ANDREW, JAMES, JOHN, THE DISCIPLES AND ALL WHO FOLLOWED HIM – WHO BELIEVED IN HIM. PERHAPS, THIS IS A WAY OF SAYING DO NOT DESPAIR, GOD IS AT WORK. EVIL AND DEATH WILL NOT TRIUMPH.

What we call the beginning is often the end

. . . .

The end is where we start from.

*Little Gidding, Canto V TS Eliot*

CERTAINLY FOR MARY AND MARTHA , IT SEEMED LIKE THE END WHEN THEIR BELOVED BROTHER LAZARUS DIED. WE KNOW LITTLE OF THEIR CIRCUMSTANCES. IT WAS POSSIBLE THAT LAZARUS WAS THE BREAD WINNER, THE HEAD OF THE HOUSEHOLD. WITHOUT HIM THEIR WAY OF LIFE WOULD BE DIMINISHED, THEIR LIVELIHOOD THREATENED, AND THER LIVES FOREVER CHANGED – EMPTY!. DEATH IS SO FINAL, SO HOPELESS, SO EMPTY. ONLY UNCERTAINTY LAY AHEAD.

WHEN JESUS HEARD LAZARUS WAS SICK, HE DALLIED TWO DAYS BEFORE GOING TO SEE HIM. – WHEN HE FINALLY ARRIVED MARTHA ADMONISHED HIM, “LORD, IF YOU'D BEEN HERE, MY BROTHER WOULD NOT HAVE DIED!” IN OTHER WORDS, JESUS, YOU CAME TOO LATE!!! LAZARUS IS DEAD AND IN THE TOMB FOUR DAYS!!

WE'VE ALL EXPERIENCED TIMES IN OUR LIVES:

WHEN IT SEEMED LIKE THE DOOR SLAMMED SHUT ON OUR HOPES AND DREAMS

WHEN EVERYTHING WE HAD HOPED FOR DISINTEGRATED INTO A PILE OF ASHES

WHEN WE LOST HOPE FOR THE FUTURE.

THAT'S WHERE MARY AND MARTHA WERE WHEN JESUS ARRIVED....

(PAUSE) SOME 40 YEARS AGO I WAS A BIT LIKE MARY AND MARTHA. WE LIVED IN NAVY HOUSING AT PEARL HARBOR HAWAII. MY HUSBAND BOB WAS DEPLOYED IN

THE PACIFIC ON A NUCLEAR SUBMARINE. OUR TWO CHILDREN WERE IN SCHOOL -- 3<sup>RD</sup> GRADE AND KINDERGARTEN.

THIS DAY, I WAS SITTING OUTSIDE THE NICU (NEONATAL INTENSIVE CARE UNIT) AT TRIPLER ARMY HOSPITAL WAITING FOR NEWS OF OUR 6 WEEK OLD INFANT SON SHAUN WHO WAS BORN WITH A HEART DEFECT – BASICALLY A VERY MALFORMED HEART. HE WAS IN HEART FAILURE AND BEING TREATED IN THE ROOM NEXT ROOM. ONE OF THE DOCTOR. DR. WOLF CAME OUT OF THE PROCEDURE ROOM, EXPLAINED THAT SHAUN’S BRAIN WAVES HAD BEEN FLAT FOR SEVERAL HOURS. HE GENTLY ASKED ME FOR PERMISSION TO TURN OFF THE VENTILATOR -- KEEPING SHAUN ALIVE.

AS HE SPOKE I FELT AS IF MY PHYSICAL BODY DROPPED. THE DESPAIR, DISBELIEF, AND PAIN SWEEPED OVER ME. HE INVITED ME INTO THE ROOM TO SAY GOOD BYE TO SHAUN – TO HOLD HIM, TO TOUCH HIM AND TO LOVE HIM A BIT. I BARELY REMEMBER THOSE MOMENTS AT ALL. I WAS SIMPLY NUMB. THE WORLD HAD GONE STILL, PULLED BACK FROM ME. THE FLOOR SEEMED TO FALL OUT FROM UNDER ME.

I’D NEVER FELT SUCH PAIN IN MY LIFE. SO I UNDERSTAND MARY AND MARTHA – OR ANYONE WHOSE LOVED ONE DIES. DEATH IS MEAN! DEATH IS MEAN! IT PHYSICALLY SEPARATES US FROM THOSE WE LOVE AND CARE FOR.

BLESSEDLY, THE NAVY RESPONDED QUICKLY BRINGING BOB HOME WITHIN 48 HOURS. THAT HELPED US BOTH THROUGH THOSE FIRST DAYS. BUT SOON BOB RE-DEPLOYED. I WAS STILL ANGRY, SAD, HOPELESS. AND “YES,” I GRIEVED. OVER THE NEXT FEW MONTHS, – I CRIED, I SCREAMED, I SHOOK MY FIST AT GOD. I WAS ANGRY. LOOKING BACK, I AM SO THANKFUL THAT THERE WERE MANY WHO REACHED TO ME/TO US AND HELPED US THROUGH THOSE SAD, TERRIBLE DAYS.

BUT I STAND HERE TO TELL YOU THAT

What we call the beginning is often the end  
 . . . . an end is to make a beginning.  
 The end is where we start from.

*Little Gidding, Canto V TS Eliot*

SHAUN’S DEATH CHANGED THE DIRECTION OF MY LIFE AND BOB’S. IT DIDN’T HAPPEN OVERNIGHT. IT TOOK TIME – YEARS. BUT WITH THE HELP OF KIND AND BELIEVING PEOPLE IN THE CHURCH, WITH OUR RECTORS ALONG THE JOURNEY, WITH GOOD FRIENDS, FAITHFUL BELIEVERS AND FAMILY. WE CAME THROUGH OUR GRIEF AND BEGAN TO FORGE AHEAD AGAIN -- CHANGED – IN SOME WAYS DIFFERENT.. IT WAS AS IF BOB AND I ROSE OUT OF THE ASHES INTO A NEW, DIFFERENT, AND FULFILLING LIFE – WHERE WE GREW IN THE KNOWLEDGE AND LOVE OF THE LORD.

I BELIEVE TS ELIOT’S IS REMINDING US THAT WHEN IT SEEMS LIKE WE COME TO AN END, WHEN WE HIT A BRICK WALL, IN REALITY IT IS A NEW BEGINNING, A NEW OPPORTUNITY – SOMETHING NEW IS COMING. WE JUST CANNOT SEE IT AT THAT MOMENT. AT THE EUCHARIST IN OUR EPISCOPAL BURIAL SERVICE WE ARE REMINDED THAT WHEN SOMEONE DIES “LIFE IS CHANGED, NOT ENDED.” LIFE IS IS CHANGED, NOT ENDED.” CHANGED! (BCP, p.349 & BCP, p. 382)

THINK HOW THE DISCIPLES, HOW MARY, MARTHA, LAZARUS WERE CHANGED BY JESUS’S DEATH AND RESURRECTION. THEY WENT FROM BEING SIMPLE PEOPLE LIVING THEIR LIVES IN GALILEE FOLLOWING JESUS TO PROCLAIMING THE GOOD NEWS. THINK OF THE APOSTLE PAUL AND ALL WHO CAME TO FAITH AS THE GOOD NEWS SPREAD AROUND THE WORLD. THINK OF THE PEOPLE YOU KNOW WHO HAVE COME TO FAITH AFTER A DIFFICULT OR TRAGIC EVENT. THINK HOW THEIR LIVES CHANGED.

GOD IS AT WORK IN THIS HARD, DIFFICULT WORLD. WHAT WE SEE AS AN ENDING IS OFTEN A NEW BEGINNING, A CHANGE OF DIRECTION. WE ARE CALLED TO

KEEP THE FAITH, TRUST GOD, BE KIND, LOVING AND COMPASSIONATE – TO SEEK  
AND SERVE CHRIST IN ALL PEOPLE FORGIVE LIBERALLY ANY WHO HURTS US.

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