

SERMON
5 Lent A
March 9, 2008
“Grief, anxiety, and resurrection”

Last week I said that I’ve accepted a job in another church
and I’ll be leaving St. Andrew’s after May 4.

I think that announcement came as kind of a shock to the parish.
It certainly means a lot of changes are ahead
for me and for St. Andrew’s.

Katy and I are trying to cope with all the changes we have ahead of us.
For us there’s fixing the house and selling it,
finding another house, packing everything up and moving,
and then getting unpacked and
finding our way in a new community.

I know it won’t be easy for St. Andrew’s, either.
When a pastor leaves a church,
it creates all kinds of anxiety in the parish.

Some people have expressed concern about St. Andrew’s after I leave.
They say, “What are we going to do without a priest?
What’s going to happen to us?”
There’s sort of a fear that the church will begin to die with out a priest in charge.

People have also expressed their sadness about my leaving.
I feel sad myself.
It’s only natural for us to feel that way,
because we’ve come to love each other over these years together.
So we’ve got some grief work to do as we face these losses.

I’ve got to say goodbye to friends I’ve come to love,
I’ve got to leave familiar routines and familiar places,
I’ve got to cut off relationships that have been life-giving for me.

I've got some grief work to do.

Grief is part of life.

If we live long enough, we have losses.

We grieve, and it cuts like a knife.

But there is such a thing as healthy grieving.

In today's Gospel lesson, Mary and Martha are grieving
because their brother Lazarus has died.

When Jesus arrives at a place not far from their home,
Martha goes to greet him.

"Lord, if you had been here," she says,
"Our brother wouldn't have died."

I guess that's a way of saying,

"Why, Lord? Why did this have to happen?"

And it's a natural question to ask when we have a big loss.

Jesus doesn't answer her question directly, but he says,

"I am the resurrection and the life.

Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,

and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.

Do you believe this?"

And she says, "Yes, Lord, I believe."

Her fears have been quieted

and her belief has given her a sense of peace.

Then Mary comes to meet Jesus and she says the same thing Martha did:

"Lord, if you had been here, our brother wouldn't have died."

She's grieving, too, and she's asking the same question we all do.

"Why did my brother have to die?

Why did my spouse have to die?

Why did my child have to die?

Why? Why?"

Jesus reaction to Mary is so profound.

He doesn't answer her with words,
but he begins to weep.

He enters in to the grief,
and he doesn't hold back.

What this tells me is that grieving is important.

When we suffer a big loss in our life, we need to acknowledge it.

Then Jesus comes to the grave, and he pauses to pray.

I think this prayer is an important part of the story,
because it tells us that Jesus reaches down inside himself
for spiritual strength.

He calls on God from his inner being.

The Psalm says, "Out of the depths have I called to you, O Lord."

That's what Jesus does here.

Then having called on God, he calls with a loud voice,

"Lazarus, come out!"

And Lazarus comes out of the cave,
still wrapped in the burial cloths.

It's a resurrection moment.

The key to all three readings for today is that

God give us the Spirit of life.

In the Old Testament lesson,

Ezekiel has a vision in which

God breathes the spirit of life into old dry bones.

In the Epistle, Paul says that it is the Spirit of God
which dwells in us that gives us life.

And in the Gospel, Jesus says straight out,

"I am life."

Death is a reality.

We're all dying.

But we have the spirit of life within us,
the spirit that comes from God.

Jesus is the Spirit of life that animates all things.

When we get in touch with the Spirit of Life that is Christ within us,
then we have life.

One of my seminary professors said that

when he visited parishes for consultations,
there were two things he always listened for.

One was how they sang the hymns,

and the other was whether there was any laughter in the church.

He said a healthy parish almost always has good singing
and you can almost always hear laughter
in the parish hall in a healthy church.

I can see what he's saying:

when people are singing enthusiastically,
it means they have their heart in what they're doing.

And when people laugh during conversation,

it means the anxiety level is low.

So those two things are pretty good indicators
that there is a spirit of life in the congregation.

Well, I would say both those things are present in this church.

I hear laughter when we get together.

I hear encouragement and energy when we're together.

So I think the Spirit of God is present in this congregation.

I don't know what the future will bring.

I have a sense of grief about leaving here.

But at the same time I have a sense that it's going to be all right.

I have a feeling that the spirit of God will be with all of us
wherever we go.

I have a feeling that God is here with us,
and God will continue to be with us,
sustaining us and carrying us and bringing us into a new future.

“I am the resurrection and the life,” said Jesus.
And in our hearts we say, like Mary,
“Lord, we believe.”