

Fifth Sunday in Lent (A/RCL)
John 11.1-45
March 12, 2005
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

I'm sure that none of **you** have children, grandchildren, students or special young friends who have ever commented that school is boring ☺. I have to confess, though, that someone in **our** house made the mistake of telling Mrs. Cleary, our church secretary, that **history** is boring. In response Claire typed up a couple single-spaced pages for the "bored student" about interesting facts of life from the 16th century, to prove that history can be pretty cool after all.

One little known fact she passed along is that they used to reuse coffins in the 1500's. After someone had been in one long enough that only bones were left behind, they removed the remains of the previous occupant, placed the bones in an ossuary (a fancy name for a box for bones), and interred someone new in the coffin. That's not the **creepiest** part of the process, though. What's **really** amazing and awful is the discovery that 17% of the coffins they dug up had scratch marks from fingernails on the inside of the lid.

It didn't take a genius to figure out that some people had been buried prematurely. To avoid that awful mistake, coffinmakers began to drill a hole in the lid of the casket, through which a string attached to a bell was strung between the coffin and ground level. Every night for a few nights after the burial, someone was assigned to sit in the cemetery and keep an ear out for a jingling bell signaling that someone needed help ASAP. This sixteenth century job is where we get our twenty-first century phrase, "working the

graveyard shift.” It’s also this little custom that gave us the words “dead ringer” and “saved by the bell.”

The Jews of Jesus’ day in Jesus’ country, Palestine, did not bury bodies in coffins in the ground. They simply wrapped bodies in linen strips and placed them in caves, across the mouth of which they would roll a stone to prevent grave robbers or animals from disturbing the dead. As Jews still do, they buried the deceased the very day of death. They did not have advanced embalming methods and the climate was hot.... However, they held out hope that the dead person might return to life within the first few days after interment, since they thought the soul hung around that long, wanting to be reunited with the body, and not giving up till the person’s face changed color, always within the first three days.

So – when Jesus commanded mourners to roll away the stone from the tomb of Lazarus, which had been shut up for **longer** than that, ever-practical Martha protested, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days” (John 11.39). She believed that once someone had been checked out for four days, they wouldn’t be checking back in again.

Six days prior, even though her brother was very ill, Martha and her sister Mary **had** had hope. Their hope was grounded in their dear friend Jesus’ power to heal. They had sent Him a very clear message: “Lord, he whom you love is ill” (John 11.3). What did they want and expect Him to do?? Drop everything, of course! “Membership has its privileges.” Martha and Mary and Lazarus were members of Jesus’ close circle of friends. St. John corroborates the fact that Jesus loved all three (John 11.5). Since He

healed total strangers, wouldn't He certainly turn back the clock on Lazarus' illness and make him whole?

We get into that kind of thinking and share similar expectations, don't we? Here we are, worshiping during this fifth weekend in Lent. We don't only show up on Christmas and Easter! When we **do** come on those high holydays, we don't even begrudge our parking space or our seat to the seldom-seen worshiper who arrived earlier than we did and took "our" parking place or seat! We are regular churchgoers and faithful Christians who do our best to live out our faith the rest of the week. We may take pride in how much money we put in the offering plate, or how much time we invest in volunteering, or in whatever the particular gift is that we are best at giving.

It's not that we **consciously** think, "You owe me one, Lord," but sometimes our anger over an apparently unanswered prayer reveals the sense of entitlement with which we prayed. We wanted and expected a certain outcome. We didn't get it and we're left peeved or crushed or perplexed. We may stop praying or stop worshiping or stop believing. We felt we **deserved** something that God didn't deliver. We mistook giving marching orders to God for prayer.

When that happens, we've got it all wrong. We are to **obey**, not to **command** God. Mary got it right when Jesus, the Teacher called for her, and "she got up quickly and went to him" (John 11.29). He called; she came. Lazarus got it right when Jesus ordered, "Lazarus, come out!" (John 11.43), and "The dead man came out, his hands and feet [still] bound with strips of cloth...." (John 11.44).

Mary and Lazarus obeyed the Lord, and were **grateful** for the gifts they received from His hands. A sense of entitlement doesn't leave us room to be grateful. When we

convince ourselves we **deserve** what is coming to us, we experience what we receive as our “due.” There is no “giving thanks with a grateful heart” for something we feel we have **earned**. A sense of entitlement **deadens** any sense of gratitude **or** openness to what God may have to give that we haven’t custom-ordered.

On the fourth day after her brother’s death and burial, Martha is overcome with disappointment that Jesus did not come through for Lazarus, her sister and herself. There is no room left in her for present hope. Jesus changes that. Lazarus is not “saved by the bell,” but by the Savior, who is Lord even over death. Unlike the poor souls we spoke about earlier who weren’t truly “gone,” Lazarus **was** and now he’s truly back. When Martha and Mary said, “Jump!” to Jesus, He didn’t ask, “How high?” He waited for the fullness of God’s time and gave them what they could never have thought to ask for: the return to life of their dead brother. We merit **nothing**, but God gives **everything** that is necessary. A sense of gratitude rather than entitlement is our holy response to God’s generosity. Amen