

Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year A

March 22, 2026

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Ezekiel 37:12-14 (I will open your graves and have you rise from them.)

Responsory: Psalm 130 (With the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption.)

Second Reading: Romans 8:8-11 (The Spirit of the One who raised Jesus dwells in you.)

Gospel: John 11:1-45 (The raising of Lazarus.)

The raising of Lazarus occurred very close to the end of Jesus' earthly life and ministry. Just as we are approaching Holy Week and the commemoration of Jesus' passion and death, *he* was approaching the time when those events would actually take place. This miracle was one of his final acts before handing over his life. Up to this point, Jesus had worked many signs, which demonstrated his divine power and *hinted at* his true identity as the Son of God. With this last and greatest miracle, however, Jesus takes that revelation to a whole new level. Even those who already believe in him as the Messiah sent by God are shocked by what they witness.

The key detail is in the timing. According to the story, if Jesus had left immediately upon hearing that his dear friend Lazarus was seriously ill, he could have arrived in Bethany within two days of his death. Instead, he *delayed* his departure and, thus, arrived after Lazarus had already been in the tomb for *four days*. That difference between two and four days was huge, because according to Jewish belief, the soul departed from a dead body after *three days*. If Jesus had come immediately, it would have been just like the other miracles in which Jesus raised up a recently deceased person. Remember the widow's son in Nain and the daughter of Jairus, the synagogue official. Both miracles occurred within hours, or at most a day, from the time of the person's death. Everyone knew that Jesus could heal people, even up to the point of death and slightly beyond. They also knew that he could heal someone who was blind from birth, as we heard last week. In fact, one of the bystanders in this story mentions that earlier miracle. He says, "Could not the one who opened the eyes of the blind man have done something so that this man *would not have died?*" Martha and Mary also express that same belief that Jesus could have saved their brother, *if only he had arrived on time*. This is the consensus among the believers, that Jesus could have saved Lazarus from dying, and he could have raised him back to life within three days of his death, but now it's too late.

In response to this *limited* belief in him, Jesus boldly proclaims, "*I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.*" Martha *says* that she believes this, but it soon becomes evident that she still doesn't understand what Jesus has revealed about his absolute power over life and death. She protests when he commands them to open the tomb, reminding him that it has been *four days*. Yes, it has been four days, because Jesus *deliberately waited that long*. He told his disciples, "This illness is not to end in death, but is for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it." That's very similar to what he said last week about the man born blind. He declared that the man was afflicted with blindness, "so that the works of God might

be made visible through him.” Lazarus would suffer death for the same reason, to show the glory of God revealed in Jesus, the Divine Son.

In the course of the narrative, John twice notes that Jesus is “perturbed and deeply troubled,” so much so that he even weeps. The bystanders assume that he’s just mourning the loss of his dear friend. But, both times that Jesus is so deeply troubled, it’s in response to the *lack of faith* that he sees in the people. It’s the same response that he would have a few days later, as he stands on the Mount of Olives, overlooking Jerusalem, and weeps, realizing that the people who are about to witness his suffering and death will not understand the meaning of these events until he rises from the dead. Now he stands before the tomb of his friend, knowing that he is about to call him back to life, but also realizing that nobody there will truly understand the meaning of this sign until *he himself* rises from the dead.

When Jesus assures Martha that her brother will rise, she thinks that he’s talking about the “resurrection on the last day.” She and many other Jews believed that at the end of time, all those who sleep in death will awaken to face judgment before God. Those judged to be righteous will receive what we might call a “heavenly” reward, while the rest will go to something like our concept of hell. Judgment, of course, will be according to the Law of Moses. Those who followed the commandments of the Law will live forever in peace, while those who did not will suffer eternal punishment.

However, Jesus is claiming a *personal authority* over life and death that no one could have suspected, not even those who believed in a type of resurrection based on righteousness and fidelity to God’s commandments. Jesus says that *he* is the source of life. *Belief in him*, not adherence to the Law, will determine who receives eternal life. This is what the raising of Lazarus signifies for us. Although Lazarus was only resuscitated temporarily, and he would later die another natural death, Jesus was demonstrating his *limitless* power to bestow life on his followers.

St. Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, explains that it is through Jesus’ death and resurrection and the Holy Spirit that dwells in us that this power is realized. He says, “If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the One who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit dwelling in you.” That Spirit *does* dwell in us. We have all received it through baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ. Hence, we live our mortal lives on earth with the promise of *immortality* in heaven.

We are about to confront that mystery head-on in the liturgies of Holy Week. Nothing challenges *and affirms* our faith in Jesus and his power over life and death more than hearing the Passion narrative proclaimed again. It’s almost as if the Lord is turning directly to us and asking the same question that he posed to Martha: “Do *you* believe that I am the resurrection and the life? Do *you* believe that I can and will grant you the gift of eternal life?” Let us search our souls and answer with conviction, “Yes, Lord, I *do* believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one sent to save us all.”