

Rev Dr Nathan John Haydon  
St Peter's Episcopal Church, Ladue  
Sermon  
22 March 2026, The Fifth Sunday in Lent Year A

### **Collect of the Day**

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

**Assigned Lectionary Readings:** Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; John 11:1-45

### **Sermon**

“Lord, if you had been here, I would not have lost my job.”

“Lord, if you had been here, my marriage would have survived.”

“Lord, if you had been here, I would still have a family.”

“Lord, if you had been here, I would have been kept safe.”

“Lord, if you have been here, my brother would not have died.”

The last of those words were said by both Martha and Mary, but in reality, many of us, if not all, will have some example, or even multiple examples, in our own lives of what they said to Jesus; words of grief, hurt, anger, and hope, for ourselves or on behalf of others. “Lord, if you had been here...” becomes something we carry deep within our bones, becomes something we may cry out loud, becomes something we say quietly in the middle of the night, or becomes something inside of us that we feel we cannot say. This condition is what we find Martha and Mary in as they wait, in Bethany, for a sign of hope that Lazarus will be healed of his illness and spared from death. Jesus hears that Martha and Mary have sent for him with a message that the one whom he loves is ill; Jesus responds to this by delaying his departure, and not arriving until Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days.

Eleonore Stump, a professor of philosophy at SLU, says of this moment that “The slow unraveling of a great hope rooted in love for another person is extremely painful. The sisters began with a great hope that Jesus, who loves Lazarus and loves them, will come to them in their hour of need. By the time he does finally head toward Bethany, the women will have had plenty of time first for dismay, disappointment and

anxiety. And then for pain and perplexity.”<sup>1</sup> And this is the difficulty when we carry this sort of hurt, because we start to see, understand, and interpret everything through it, yet the irony is that when we view the world through this lens, everything begins to unravel and stops making sense — most especially the platitudes that swirl around these moments from well-meaning people. In his book *A Grief Observed*, CS Lewis writes about this very thing, saying, “Talk to me about the truth of religion and I’ll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I’ll listen submissively. But don’t come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don’t understand.”<sup>2</sup> At times, it seems that all we are left with is nothing but unsatisfactory answers to these problems, when we are confronted with what we see locally and globally, not to mention what may be happening with us personally. So when we find ourselves resonating and identifying with the poet for our psalm today, “Out of the depths have I called to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice,” what do we do when we feel our voice and prayer are not being heard? What I hope I can offer here is a little encouragement — because it is courage that is needed in such times to not give in to hopelessness.

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the Saturday right before Palm Sunday is entitled “Lazarus Saturday.” The gospel we heard today is considered to be, put it into our terms, as a “little Easter,” or a proclamation of the Resurrection of Christ, and therefore a proclamation of the resurrection of all, that is founded in Jesus Christ. The grief of Mary and Martha—even the grief of Christ that we see in this passage—is not unimportant, but it is not the true focus. We are afforded in the story of Lazarus a glimpse of what awaits us all — the pilgrimage of our life, with all its pain, sorrow, and joys, is moving us closer, and closer, and even closer, to new life, new skin and sinews on our dry bones, new spirits and breath in our lungs, and new hearts in our chest. No sooner are we mired in the depths that we are then wrenched from above and exalted to new life, because God in Christ has been in those very depths with us. The weeping of Christ over Lazarus is not just over the one whom he loved, but over the very condition of humanity that embraces death over life. To quote again from Eleonore Stump, speaking about this condition, says

That Jesus picks Martha, Mary, and Lazarus as the ones whose request for help he won’t answer immediately, at least not in the way they expect. That’s a sign of his trust in them. It suggests that Mary, Martha, and Lazarus have the kind of spiritual condition needed to maintain their trust in him, even in the face of a disappointment as severe as his not coming to heal Lazarus. So in continuing in their trust in him, around the hardship of deferred help, they gain in the glory of spiritual excellence too.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eleonore Stump, “Heartbrokenness and the Problem of Suffering: The Story of Mary of Bethany,” *Biola Center for Christian Thought*, <https://cct.biola.edu/heartbrokenness-problem-suffering-story-mary-bethany-eleonore-stump/>. Accessed 21 March 2026.

<sup>2</sup> CS Lewis, *A Grief Observed* in *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*. New York: HarperCollins (2002), 449.

<sup>3</sup> Stump, “Heartbrokenness.”

The late Orthodox priest Alexander Schmemmann writes of this gospel, saying that “We understand now that it is because He wept, i.e., loved His friend Lazarus and had pity on him, that He had the power of restoring life to him. The power of Resurrection is not a Divine “power in itself,” but the power of love, or rather, love as power. God is Love, and it is love that creates life; it is love that weeps at the grave and it is, therefore, love that restores life.”<sup>4</sup> I must assert here that this is no mere religious consolation, but the adamant and very love of God permeating us, healing us, restoring us, making us divine, and calling us back to what we were made for from the very beginning.

A professor of the New Testament, Laura Holmes, says that “The story of the resurrection of Lazarus begins in a very human place: Two sisters tell Jesus that one “whom you love” is sick (John 11:3). They do not tell him what to do; they tell him what they know. And then they wait.”<sup>5</sup> So when you find yourself in the depths, tell God what you know. When you see others in the depths, tell God what you know. The last thing our gospel mentions is Jesus giving those present at the tomb of Lazarus a command — to unbind Lazarus of his burial shroud. So tell God what you know, and let Christ unbind you of your burial shroud through others. And may you unbind others of their own burial shrouds through Christ. Whether we know it or not, see it or not, or believe or not, we are all in a valley of dry bones, but the unconquerable love of God will conquer all things, and the Lord trusts you, and me, to keep hope in choosing the path of life. Thanks be to God.

AMDG

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<sup>4</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, “Saturday of Lazarus.” *Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann*, <https://www.schmemmann.org/byhim/lazarussaturday.html>. Accessed 21 March 2026.

<sup>5</sup> Laura Holmes, “Commentary on John 11:1-45.” *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-11-45-6>. Accessed 21 March 2026.