Homily: 5th Sunday of Lent (yr. B, using A readings)

We’ve all experienced the death of a close family member. We can also then relate to the anger and disappointment Martha and Mary had toward JESUS; if you had been here, my brother would not have died, both say to HIM. The impact that a death has on a family is very real to all who’ve had the experience. No one can deny the power, death has in devastating the lives of the living; it leaves a gaping wound that sometimes is never healed. This is even true in the Life of JESUS. HE cried twice in Scripture that we know of. Once over Jerusalem and in this narrative of Lazarus’s death. HE cries over a death, in a family that HE Loved. HE cries because HE has lost HIS friend -as most have assumed for the last two thousand years. However, some scholars have a different theory as to the cause of the tears; having less to do with the dead man and more to do with those around him. According to these scholars, JESUS is not only moved to tears - HE is perturbed and deeply troubled. Why? Because HE sees the power of death over the living, and how it effects their relationship with HIM. In this narrative, the power of death blocks everyone from coming to full faith in JESUS. This conclusion might come as a surprise, since Martha is often held up as THEE example of faith in JESUS, but some scholars suggest we take another look. JESUS hears that Lazarus is sick, but from the beginning HE says; this illness is not to end in death but is for the Glory of GOD. From the beginning, JESUS is Proclaiming that Lazarus will NOT be conquered by death. But HE waits two more days before deciding to return to Judea. The disciples oppose HIS decision because the Jews had just been trying to stone HIM. JESUS responds, Lazarus is asleep, but I’m going to awaken him. When they press HIM further, HE finally says; Lazarus has died. And I am glad for you that I wasn’t there, that you may believe. Obviously, JESUS has a reason for the timing, and it will lead to a greater Faith in HIM; but the disciples don’t understand. This is obvious in Thomas’s response; “Let us also go to die with HIM.” From the very beginning then, the focus of those who surround JESUS is on death - not on coming to belief, but on death, embracing and overwhelming all of them. When JESUS gets there, Martha comes out. Traditionally, this conversation has been seen as a great expression of faith. But again, some scholars see it differently. Long time biblical scholar: Fr. Francis Moloney argues that it’s no such thing. According to him, no one in the narrative comes to full belief, especially not Martha. Martha’s conversation with JESUS starts with a rebuke, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. She’s looking to JESUS as a miracle worker, as one who cures sickness. What does she say? Even now I know that whatever you ask of GOD, GOD will give YOU. In other words, YOU could’ve cured my brother, but YOU didn’t bother to come. When JESUS says your brother will rise, she replies, I know he will rise, in the Resurrection on the Last Day. JESUS then says: I AM the RESURRECTION and the LIFE, whoever believes in ME, even if he dies, will live. Do you believe this? Martha responds, Yes, LORD. I have come to believe that YOU are the CHRIST, the SON Of GOD, the ONE WHO is coming into the world. But notice, Martha doesn’t express belief in JESUS as the RESURRECTION and the LIFE. She says what she HAS believed about JESUS already. She expresses belief in JESUS in the terms used at that time for the MESSIAH. According to Fr. Moloney, these are expressions used by those who haven’t yet come to fall faith - Martha included - and this is confirmed when they get to the Tomb. What does she say when she realizes JESUS is commanding the stone to be rolled away? LORD, by now there will be a stench, he’s been dead for four days. JESUS, though, stands HIS ground. Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of GOD? Martha has only been able to go so far on the way to faith. Mary, however, goes farther. When Martha tells her, the Teacher is here, she responds immediately and goes to HIM. She kneels at HIS Feet and repeats part of what Martha says: if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But she doesn’t ask JESUS to be a miracle worker. It looks like Mary has it right. According to Fr. Frank Moloney she trusts in JESUS. But then, she is pulled back into grief She begins to cry again. This is where we’re told; JESUS becomes perturbed and deeply troubled. It looks like Mary has it right; but she too isn’t quite there yet. And the Jews with her are also crying. And they can’t help but ask; Could not the ONE WHO opened the eyes of the blind man have done something so that this man would not have died? For them, JESUS is no more than a miracle worker; a miracle worker whose powers don’t always come thru; a miracle worker WHO only seems to be able to cure a few. One thing is obvious. The power of death overwhelms the living. There’s not one person who isn’t taken up in grief. In other words, there’s no one who trusts in JESUS as the RESURRECTION and the LIFE. Not the disciples, not Martha, not Mary, not the Jews ..... no one. The power of death has broken them all so to speak. Death has conquered their hearts. But then comes the Prayer of JESUS: FATHER, I thank YOU for having heard ME. I know that YOU always hear ME, but because of the crowd here I have said this, that they may Believe that YOU sent ME. And finally, it comes - Lazarus, come out! Lazarus comes out; hands and feet wrapped in the burial bands, face covered, wrapped in the bonds of death. The tears and deep frustration of JESUS at the failure of all present to put their trust in HIM gives way to a word of liberation: untie him and let him go! Death continues to be the greatest threat to faith - to our trust in GOD. The power of death crushes life; not only the life of those who die, but of all those who love them. In the face of death, however, JESUS continues to proclaim, I AM the RESURRECTION and the LIFE. HE asks us who gather here around the Table; Do YOU believe? Do you trust ME even when you are overwhelmed and in the greatest pain of your life? Be it a death of a family member, a close friend; good health, your reputation, your financial security. Lent calls us to look at death, all the deaths we might encounter in life, all the deaths of our lives and hearts, and find our trust and security in the Face of the ONE WHO Proclaims; I AM the RESURRECTION and the LIFE. At the end of Lent, in about two weeks, we will be called upon to once again answer the question, do you believe? To Profess our faith in the Crucified, yet RISEN LORD, WHO broke death’s chains and walked from the grave into the Dawn of a New day. In these last two weeks, may the Lenten Season continue to renew our lives in CHRIST, that despite whatever may happen, we will always believe and find our Treasure in CHRIST, the RESURRECTION, and the LIFE. May HIS Grace continue to Transform and renew us in HIS Love, that whatever may happen will only serve to deepen our Faith and Trust that HE is with us and will never abandon us. May this continuing journey into the Lenten desert lead us into a trustful surrender that whatever may happen and whatever we may encounter on the journey of life will lead us to recognize HIS Loving and Compassionate Presence; a Presence that will ultimately conquer even the power and enemy of death.