

I am sure that you have noticed by now that the past three Sunday's Gospels have been pretty long. It not to get you use to standing for a long time for when the passion will be read next Sunday and again on Good Friday. But there were some good points to be made and you had to have all the details to get the whole story.

Two weeks ago Christ told the woman at the well that he was the Messiah; last week he cured a man born blind, something no one had ever done before; and now he tops everything by raising Lazarus from the dead. Each of the readings had a little story to tell before they got to the main point

This week the main point may be that everybody dies, but there are also many little and large experiences of dying along the way. There are the losses of friends and family whose absences create a dying in our hearts. There are the losses of oppressed and needy brothers and sisters throughout the world whose deaths continue to assault the consciences of those more fortunate. There is the dying of a friendship as it is surrendered to an argument that cannot or will not be resolved.

There are the deaths that come as the distances between us grow larger and our times of communion less frequent. There are the inevitable deaths when memory fails, when bones break and muscles ache with the loss of youthful vigor. There are also deaths that come with the loss of a job or a home.

In all these experiences of death, believers are assured that these deaths are but a prelude to that final act of surrender to God. Each helps us prepare for the moment that is not an end but a passage to a new and endless beginning.

The image Ezekiel gives of God opening graves and having people rise from them was so fantastic as to be, in a word, unbelievable. Yet, the word from God delivered by the prophet said, "I have promised, and I will do it, says the Lord." The vision offered hope to a nation that had been conquered. It was a vision of a nation coming back to life. It was a vision of incredible hope.

The purpose of Jesus' trip to Bethany and His raising Lazarus from the dead was to prepare the disciples to cope with and grieve His death. They would be devastated by His death, but after witnessing what He did for Lazarus, they would be able to face death differently.

We are about to enter the experience of this death ourselves, as we continue on to Holy Week and the three days we call the Triduum, but Jesus models for us how to grieve.

This passage contains the shortest verse in the New Testament: "Jesus wept."

If the resurrection of Lazarus from the dead isn't enough to give us unlimited confidence in Christ, this verse should be more than enough. Jesus is

God, all-knowing and all-powerful. And yet, in the face of his friend's death, and in the face of the grief of his other friends, Martha and Mary, he is moved to tears.

Jesus Christ is not a distant God. Jesus wept, and he weeps. He weeps with us when we weep. He stays with us in the Eucharist when everyone else abandons us.

Jesus wept with Martha and Mary before he raised Lazarus from the dead, because he wanted to assure us that he will always be with us in our sufferings too.

When we are tempted to be angry at God or to feel abandoned by him, we need only think of the shortest verse in the New Testament: Jesus wept.

Over the course of many years I have attended many funerals, some of families with little or no faith experience were the most emotional. For these families, to lose a loved one was devastating and the sense of loss overwhelming.

Two weekends ago I went to three funerals; one was for my friend, one for the mother of a friend, and one that I presided for that was for an infant. Little Zoe Elizabeth, who's picture I have displayed up here. It was that one that had the greatest affect on me. Yes there were tears and crying, but it was more of a celebration of life. Presiding at that service showed me the great

respect that family had for life, life that started at conception and ended after only 17 ½ weeks in the womb.

It is almost impossible for someone who believes in God and the promise of life after death to imagine how death feels for those who have no such belief. While believers still might “grieve hard,” such grieving still possesses a sense of hope.

God made each one of us to live with Him forever, face to face. But we cannot know God in that intimate way in our earthly condition. God is Spirit, and if we want to know God as God really is, then we have to know God in Spirit.

We must let God translate our story into divine language. We must walk through that final closed door.

If we respect the mystery of death without being paralyzed by it, we realize that the purpose of death is to recycle our earthly experience into a form transferable to heaven, and to transform our imperfect self into someone capable of enjoying the personal friendship of God. Now, death, where is thy sting?

Yes we grieve the lost of a loved one, but we grieve with hope! In that final moment, and in all the little preludes of dying that lead up to that moment, and

as he looks at our humanly body and the spirit within Jesus will say to us as he said so long ago at the tomb of Lazarus, “Come out! Unbind them and let them go free!”