

Second Sunday of Lent – 2021 B

“So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what ‘rising from the dead’ meant.” This is the task of Lent for each of us: to understand what rising from the dead means; to know how to leave the past behind for something new, how to share in the sacrifice of Christ so we can live a new life in Him. If we are willing, this season gradually forms us to understand that God’s grace is no more real when we experience times of glory, like the Transfiguration; and no less real when we share in the Cross. ***Both are part of sharing the life of Jesus, though our sufferings can often feel far more potent than our hopes.***

This small Crucifix is a priceless gift, given to me by a woman named Barbara – some of you may have known her – now long retired and living out of state. Hers was in many ways a difficult life – born with some genetic disabilities, she raised six children amid many hospitalizations, surgeries, and household relocations for her physician-husband’s job with the VA. Bedridden for months at a time, she would simply hold tightly to this Cross and pray.

During one of those bouts of illness, when she did not think she would survive, Barbara told me she made a list of the three possessions she had that were most precious to her, three things she could not imagine parting with ... ***and then she gave them away.*** I have no idea what the other two objects were, or who received them; but the Crucifix came to me, a gift I certainly don’t deserve but which I hold in stewardship until it will be handed on to someone else. ***Apart from its own value, it also means even more knowing something about the suffering that it has helped to interpret and comfort.***

In those difficult periods, Barbara might have asked herself, what does rising from the dead mean? Of course, it meant the final hope of eternal life. But it also meant starting over, rising from a sickbed to continue to care for her family, return the kindness she experienced from those who cared for her, and find fresh purpose and a new day.

The unsettling story of Abraham and Isaac also gives us a perspective on what it might mean to rise from the dead. Read in its larger context, this episode is a foreshadowing of the greater covenant that is ratified at the Cross. Another sacrifice is offered in place of Isaac, hinting at the death of Jesus, the Lamb of God handed over for us; and Abraham receives his son back, unharmed, anticipating the Resurrection.

The Transfiguration, too, is an anticipation, a glimpse of the glory Jesus had set aside for the years of His earthly life. The Father declares that this is indeed His Son, sent to complete the purpose of the Law, confirm the promises of the prophets, and reunite us with God. *Then silence falls, the vision disappears, and Peter, James, and John are left with a searing memory and lots of questions.* The divine glory of Jesus was always there – hidden but not lost, present though unseen – and finally revealed again only once the mystery of the Cross was complete, when Jesus had freely embraced our human suffering and even death so that we need not fear them ... and so we would know what rising from the dead means.

The hope of eternal life is central to Christian faith, but we also need glimpses of glory and smaller resurrections along the way: to get up again when we fail in our resolutions; to try anew when we are tired or run into obstacles; to renew our trust and hope, day by day, in prayer. Even when it visits us in the shape of a Cross, the promise of glory and the support of grace is no less real – *hidden but not lost, present though unseen.* Jesus shares with us the strength we need to walk through Lent, holding on to the Cross, so we may come transformed to Easter – *an+d know what it means to rise from the dead.*