

I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE – Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM

Jn 11.1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again."

The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him.

When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." ⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, ⁴⁶ but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

The good news brought by Jesus is that death, not only does not interrupt life, but it is that which permits it to flourish in a new form, full and definite. It is what John formulates in his Gospel with the episode that is exclusive to this evangelist, that of the resurrection of Lazarus, chapter 11.

Lazarus, Jesus' disciple, is ill, he dies. And when Jesus arrives, he is already in the tomb. Let's see how the evangelist presents the meeting of Jesus with the community represented by the sisters. Well now, the first reaction of one of the sisters, Marta reproaches him. They had send to tell Jesus that Lazarus was ill and Jesus did not move.

Therefore, the first reaction is of reproach "*«Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died...»*." She recalls what she knows, the traditions "*«.. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you»*". To understand all the dynamic of this dialogue one must know this: the verb 'to ask' indicates the request of an inferior to a superior, while when a request is between equals, the verb 'to demand' is used. Therefore she thinks that Jesus is inferior to God, she has not understood that in Jesus God's fullness is manifested.

Jesus says to her: "*«Your brother will rise again. »*" and Martha replies dryly "*«I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. »*" She believes that the resurrection will be at the end of time and so this does not bring consolation or comfort to those that cry for the person loved. And here – this verse is important – that Jesus changes radically the concept of life, the concept of death and the concept of the resurrection.

"Jesus said to her, *«I am.. »*", 'I am' is the divine name, but it is the present, he does not say 'I will be' "*«I am the resurrection »*" The resurrection will not be in the future, as Martha believes, but it is the present with Jesus, because Jesus says "*«I am the resurrection and the life. »*" Jesus is the resurrection and the life. And so, here is Jesus' important declaration on life and death. "*«Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.. »*".

Therefore a disciple like Lazarus, that had supported Jesus, now even if he is dead, continues to live. Therefore, who believes even if dead, will live. And then, addressed the community, that is alive, Jesus declares: "*«...everyone who lives and believes in me...»*", therefore those that supported Him, "*« ... shall never die»*".

Jesus comes to change the concept of life and death. The Lord does not resurrect the dead, but gives the living a life able to suppurate death. Eternal life is no more a hope for the future, but a certainty for the present. Therefore, in front of this radical change of life and death, Jesus asks Martha "*«Do you believe this? »*" that is, do you believe that who supports me has a life that is able to suppurate death?

"She said to him, *«Yes, Lord; I believe»*". Now finally she does not know, but believes and gives support, "*«..that you are the Christ, »*" – there is the excommunication for those that recognize in Jesus the Messiah - "*«the Son of God, who is coming into the world»*". Saying these words she goes to call Mary, speaking privately. Why speak privately? Until then the community believed that Jesus was a prophet, sent from God, He had the sympathy of the people, even some of the leaders, But, when Jesus is known as the Messiah, it is here that the troubles begin.

Well then, Jesus – affirms the evangelist - "*..had not yet come into the village*", the village is always a place of tradition, that finds difficulty in accepting Jesus' novelty and , in this village, there are Jews, leaders of the people, that make condolences for the funeral to Lazarus' sisters for the death of their brother. And here there is to distinguish between the two Greek verbs, 'cry' and 'weep'

The sisters and the Jews are crying and this means desperation for something that is no more. Well, Jesus, seeing all this, here it is translated with 'deeply moved'. One is not moved, the verb indicates to groan, lament, Jesus sighing because He sees that His community thinks exactly as His enemies, the Jews. They have not yet understood the novelty that he has already said, that the life that He communicates is able to overcome death.

Jesus had already said: "*«...everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die...»*", but still He has not been understood. So, "*greatly troubled. he said, »*" "*«Where have you laid him? »*" That is you that have put him in some place. And Jesus does not cry, but weeps. The evangelist distinguishes the cry of

the Jews and the sisters, that is a cry of desperation, and the weeping of Jesus that is an expression of sorrow.

So Jesus, always sighing, goes to the tomb– it was a cave – “*and a stone lay against it.*” We all know the saying ‘to cover it with a stone’, meaning that all is over, finished. If, one is resurrected the last day, but it is certainly a hope. And here there are three imperative verbs that Jesus asks of His community and they are ‘take away’, ‘unbind’ and ‘let go’.

The first is “*Take away the stone.*” It is you that have put this stone that prevents communication between the dead and the living. “*Jesus said, Martha, the sister of the dead man,*” It is strange that the evangelist remembers that Martha is the sister of the dead man and not of Lazarus, because it is the idea of death that dominates this community. “*Lord, by this time there will be an odor,*” Death was considered real, definite on the third day, when the inevitable decomposition of the corpse had already begun.

Therefore on the fourth day the corpse was already in purification and the effect of death is the odour. “*..he has been dead four days.*” Jesus says to them: “*«Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God? »*” But Jesus when He had asked Martha if she believed He had asked “do you believe that he who lives and believes does not die?” Now Jesus says: “If you believe you will see the glory of God”.

What does He want to indicate? That with the indestructible life, death can be suppurated, the Glory of God will be shown. The glory of God is a life able to suppurate death. “*So they took away the stone.*” The word stone appears for the third time. “*..he cried out with a loud voice...*”, He is addressing a living person. “*«Lazarus, come out».*” because the kingdom of the dead is no place for Jesus’ disciple. Who had supported Jesus, had the spirit, and the spirit is life. And there where there is life, there cannot be death.

But, strangely while Jesus was calling Lazarus, the evangelist writes, “*The man who had died came out,*” So here there is a problem, If he is dead he could not come out, if he is alive he is not dead. Why does the evangelist say the dead man came out? He actually says “*... his hands and feet bound with linen strips*”,. One of the images to indicate death, and we find it in the psalm 116 “the snares of death encompassed me.” It is the community that must change the image of death and of the resurrection. For them, Lazarus is dead and this death that must come out of the tomb to permit Lazarus to be present in the community.

They are the ones that have been encompassed with the snares of death, considering death as an irreversible fact. And here again Jesus’ command: “*«Unbind him »*”, unbinding death is the community that unbinds itself of the fear of death. And Jesus’ last strange command, He does not say “let’s go and meet him, welcome him, let him come” Amongst other things Lazarus then disappears and does not say one word to either to Jesus or his sisters. “*« let him go».*”

But where must Lazarus go? Or better, where must death go? It must continue to walk towards the Father. The verb ‘to go’ in the John’s Gospel is used for Jesus to indicate His itinerary towards the

Father. So what does the evangelist want to say through this image? That it is the community that must liberate itself of the idea of death as the end of the person because, until one cries for a person as dead, you cannot experience them as living. So death must be unbound, let it go towards the Father, where Lazarus already is, alive, living more than ever.