

**Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year A, 9.iii.2008, 10:00 a.m.  
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania  
Holy Eucharist, *ELW* Setting 5  
Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 5:6-11; John 11:1-45**

## **J. J. !**

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was  
and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

**Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow  
disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."**

**-- John 11:16**



The great American folksinger,  
Odetta, was interviewed by  
Tavis Smiley the other evening.  
Tavis wanted to host Odetta on  
His show, not just because of  
her renown as a performer, but

because she had known Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and

had even stood near him on the podium on the Mall in Washington, D.C., as they surveyed together the thousands upon thousands of demonstrators who had gathered to claim their freedom and their dignity as Americans and as members of the human family.

“I did *not* know him,” Odetta told her disappointed interviewer, going on to explain, “I merely sat at his feet, I merely stood in his presence, guided by his spirit, singing the words and music of the freedom movement he led.”

Odetta then went on to say that she had ‘known’ Dr. King only as so many African Americans had, only as her mother had. “There was a time in this country when, whether you lived ‘down South’ or ‘down North,’ if your skin was dark, you knew where you belonged and where you didn’t, that is to say, where you were safe and where you were not. There was a time when you knew not to

question, when my mother, for example, would receive a utility bill for \$500 and would do whatever she had to do to scrape together that \$500 so as not to get into trouble.



“And then came Dr. King,”  
she explained, “walking ahead  
of us, without fear, without  
illusions, and without hate,  
with only love in his heart and in

his message for all people. And suddenly, the descendants of slaves like my mother started questioning their utility bills, and young people like me at that time began leaving the places racial segregation had marked off as safe for us and we began entering the places where we might be shamed or belittled or where worse might happen to us.

We went there, and we have arrived where we are today, because someone else went before us, someone who paid the ultimate price for his courage to show us the way.”

The Disciples of Jesus we meet in today’s Gospel are ordinary people, an occupied people living in an occupied country. They are called to an extraordinary life and mission. They are draftees, not volunteers. All of the inner circle of The Twelve are *called* by Jesus to follow Him in the Kingdom of Heaven. They and the larger circle of The Seventy are *sent* out by Jesus with authority and the power to cast out unclean spirits and to heal the sick. Being *sent* by Christ is what it means to be an Apostle, and they are among those who have been sent and will be sent again. But, with all that, they are still just men, still just

human like you and me, and, in today's Gospel, they exhibit a very human emotion.

They express their fear, not as an animal does, at something threatening or puzzling that has just happened.

Humans have that fear as well. But we are also able to fear what *might* happen, what likely will happen based on our reasoning concerning facts we know about how things are now and how they might be in the future. The Disciples of Jesus are terrified at what might happen if they leave Samaria, where they most likely are when news of Lazarus' illness reaches them, terrified at what might happen if they cross the border back into Judæa. That is where they just were. That is where Jesus healed the man born blind. That is where both the miracle and what Jesus and the man he cured said about that miracle enraged certain religious leaders among the Judæans, 'the Jews.' That is where, as

today's Gospel explains, the Jews had threatened or tried to have Jesus stoned to death. The Disciples do not want to return there and they do not want Jesus to return there. But that is where Jesus' friend, Lazarus, has died. That is where Jesus will perform the miracle that, more than any other, will reveal the power and glory of God in Him, the Son of God. It is a miracle they will witness, but they are afraid

Three times Our Lord signals that it is time to go to Bethany in Judæa for the raising of Lazarus (vv. 7, 11, 15), and twice the Disciples plead with Him not to go (vv. 8, 12). Finally Thomas, who must have loved Jesus profoundly to say what he said, leads the others in following Jesus toward a certain death. Sometimes the Holy Spirit calls us to places we would rather not visit, among people we might just as soon not know, into

situations we would rather not face, into situations in which the needs of others place demands on us, demands upon our time, demands upon our energy, demands upon our treasure, and sometimes demands upon our courage. It is scarcely possible for us to imagine facing what Saint Thomas and the other Disciples are facing here. And yet, the Christian Church was founded and built on such a determination to embrace the cause of Jesus Christ in this world, even if that meant entering a place of danger and hostility, even if it might eventually mean our death.

The Disciples make that journey back into dangerous territory with Jesus. They confront death with Him, and they see Him, His Heavenly Father and the Holy Spirit like a mighty wind, triumph over death, at least one death on one day. The miracle of raising dead Lazarus back to life adds to the motives the Judæan enemies of

Jesus have to put a stop to Him, to His teaching and to His wonder-working.

Where you and I are called by the Holy Spirit and the letter of Scripture to seek genuine peace and reconciliation, perhaps needing to speak the truth to power, or perhaps simply needing to speak where communication of any sort has grown strained to the breaking point, that may be a place to which we would rather not go. Why does Jesus not just lead us to live and serve among those who love us and will keep us safe, who see the world pretty much as we do? Why go back to that spiritual Judæa and Jerusalem where we know we will face gossip and slander or worse? Why? Because there, whether in society or in the Congregation of Christ, is the beloved brother or sister whose needs do not stop when hurtful words of gossip are shouted or whispered, when others or we ourselves are

shamed or shunned. How? How can we go into that arena of brokenness and healing, we who are ourselves broken and in need of healing and



forgiveness? We can do it because we are always *following* Him Who goes *before* us, the One Who, for the sake of His friend, Lazarus, whom He loved and

for whom He wept, crossed that boundary of safety to reach him, to reach him and raise him up when it seemed to others far too late. He knows where He is leading us, through this world, to the neighbor in need, to the Cross, to a new and everlasting life that names injustice and oppression and faces it down, a life that has accepted death

and triumphed over it. Let us die to ourselves that we may also go with Him—to live with Him forever and ever!

✠Amen.



Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. ✠ Amen.

