

EVE OF THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT | MARCH 25, 2023

EZEKIEL 37:1-14 | JOHN 11:1-45

We're going to do something a little bit different today. Instead of my usual nine or ten minute homily, we're going to do a guided Ignatian contemplation using today's gospel reading. Some of you have done these with me before, and so this will be familiar. For some of you this will be new, which is great.

Ignatian contemplation comes to us from Ignatius of Loyola, who is best known as the founder of the Jesuits. Ignatius was born in Spain in the late fifteenth century. And one of the formative experiences of his life came early on when he was shot with a cannonball. Somehow, this didn't kill him, but he had to undergo a long recovery process. And while he was recovering, the only book he had access to was a lives of the saints. And after reading it repeatedly, he had some kind of conversion experience. He started going to daily mass, praying for hours on end every day, and living in a cave.

And one day, he's sitting by this river, and he has this sort of mystical experience. In his autobiography, he writes that "the eyes of his understanding began to open and, without seeing any vision, he understood and knew many things, as well spiritual things as things of the faith... It was as if he were a new man with a new intellect." So he starts writing a book that becomes known as the *Spiritual Exercises*. Ignatian contemplation is one of those exercises. He didn't invent it—St. Francis of Assisi had similar practices—but Ignatius popularized it.¹

And to understand what Ignatian contemplation is, I think it helps to think about how mainline Protestants typically encounter stories from the gospels. Typically, we approach these stories through analysis. If you've ever done a Bible study with me or read one of Gerry Lauro's newsletter articles, this is usually what we're doing. We might read today's gospel reading and say, "Well, it's about burial, so I want to learn something about first-century burial practices." Or maybe I want to look up the word John uses for "love" and see where else he uses that in his gospel. I can understand the gospel if I have better information.

Ignatian contemplation is based on the idea that instead of analyzing the text, holding it at arm's length, we try to enter the story. Ignatius described it as a "composition of place." So instead of finding the gospel through analysis, we find it through imagination.

So, we're going to do this together. I'm going to walk you through this gospel reading with some questions. You don't need to answer these out loud, you can just keep them to yourself. And I invite you to get as comfortable as you can. Shut your eyes if that helps. Take a deep breath in. Deep breath out. Observe whatever sensations you have in your body. One more deep breath in and exhale out.

Imagine that you are in the house with Mary and the crowd. What does the house look like? Do you hear any sounds coming in from outside? People talking in the street or animals kept outside? What type of day is it? Is it a hot day? Is it overcast? Maybe the scent of someone's kitchen wafts through the window. What does it feel like to be in this room?

Suddenly, there's a commotion as Mary gets up and runs outside. Everyone in the house scrambles after her to see what's happening. Over someone's shoulder, you notice a familiar face. Jesus is here. What does Jesus look like? What is he wearing? What expression does he have on his face? You notice that Mary has started crying again. And as you look around, you see that many of the people around you in the crowd start weeping, too. You hear Mary say something to Jesus. "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." What does her voice sound like? You wait for

¹ Background here is just from Britannica and the James Martin book *Learning to Pray*.

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Jesus to respond, but he doesn't say anything. Instead, he starts crying, too. What does Jesus look like when he weeps? What does he sound like?

Mary invites Jesus to come and see where they laid Lazarus and the crowd starts to move. What do the people in the crowd say to one another? Are they still weeping? Do they criticize Jesus? Do they talk about Lazarus? What does the path toward the tomb look like? What emotions do you feel as you walk toward the tomb? What do you expect to find there?

Finally, Mary brings Jesus and the crowd to the tomb, and everyone goes silent. What does the tomb look like? How big is the stone covering the entrance? How do the people in the crowd react when they see the tomb?

Everyone in the crowd waits for Jesus to do something. Finally, Jesus says, "Take away the stone." Martha interrupts and replies, "There is already a stench because he has been dead for four days." Does Martha sound confused? Skeptical? Protective? Jesus replies, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" What does Jesus do when he says these words? Does he place a hand on her shoulder? Does he gesture toward the tomb?

A group from the side of the crowd jumps in and rolls the stone off to the side. You wait for something to happen or for Jesus to do something. But instead, Jesus looks up to the sky and says in a quiet voice, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." What does Jesus look like when he prays? Does he have his hands stretched out, folded, or at his side? Is the crowd around you quiet or are they talking about what Jesus will do next?

Suddenly, Jesus's voice gets much louder, almost a shout. He says, "Lazarus, come out!" Everything is quiet now as everyone looks toward the tomb. Where are Mary and Martha looking? What expressions do you see on their faces? What is Jesus doing? What are you expecting to see? What emotions are you feeling?

Suddenly, you see a figure emerge from the dark tomb. Just the outline at first, then more clearly. His body is covered in pieces of burial linens. His face is obscured by a cloth as well. How does the man walk out of the tomb? What do you notice about him? You look around at the other faces in the crowd. How do the people react? Are they shocked? Are they crying? Are they rejoicing? You look toward the tomb and see Mary and Martha. What are they doing? Are they holding each other? Are their hands covering their mouths in disbelief? And what emotions do you feel? Are you rejoicing? Are you afraid? Are you confused?

After Lazarus emerges from the tomb, you see Jesus gesture like he wants to talk to you. So you and a couple other people from the crowd walk over to Jesus. What feelings arise in you? Are you nervous? Excited? Scared? As you get closer, Jesus looks at you intently. What do you notice about him when you're this close? Does he seem tired from his journey? Does he still have tears on his face?

You watch as Jesus points a finger toward Lazarus, standing by the entrance to the tomb. Then Jesus turns to you, looks you in the eye and says, "Unbind him, and let him go."

When you're ready, I invite you take a deep breath in and a slow exhale out. And return your attention to the present moment.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor