

5 Lent A – Fr. Val Handwerker

April 2, 2017

Cathedral

5:00 and Noon

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**“Jesus wept.”** It’s the shortest verse in the entire Bible. It’s from today’s Gospel. Jesus saved a life, that of his friend Lazarus. **“Untie him and let him go free.”** In exchange, it would cost Jesus his own life on the cross.

**“Jesus wept.”** The shortest verse in the Bible. On the early morning of February 21, 1984, Louise DeGrafinried used that verse to lure another Lazarus from the tomb of death. Mrs. DeGrafinried and her husband Nathan met violence face to face at their home in Fayette County, some 50 miles from here in the town of Braden. That February morning, as she later put it, **“This young man was there at the door with a gun—a beautiful gun—in my husband’s side. It just shined that fine frost morning.”** (1) Three days earlier a convicted murderer named Riley Arzeneaux had escaped from Fort Pillow State Prison. He surprised the DeGrafinrieds, and forced his way into their home. With hate deep in the marrow of his bones, he was ready to end a life.

Instead, she was about to save a life. **“You put that gun down, this is a house of God,”** thundered this 73-year-old African-American lady. **“There will be no violence in this house.”** Then she fixed for the escapee a heaping plate of bacon and eggs, and as he was about to devour the breakfast she made, Mrs. DeGrafinried stopped him.

**“Aren’t you going to say grace?”** When Arzeneaux protested that he didn’t pray, she taught him, **“Just say, ‘Jesus wept.’”** As she later explained, **“I figured that he didn’t have no church background, so I wanted to start him off simple...something short, you know.”**

Arzeneaux later said that her presence and touch and her talk of God **“defused”** him. As he admitted, **“I tried to put fear in her, but I couldn’t.”** At the breakfast table she prayed and cried for him, and encouraged him to surrender. He was afraid the police would kill him. Mrs. DeGrafinried’s answer was direct: **“Let me do the talking. Nobody’s going to kill you.”**

And so, as they walked out the front door, arm in arm, Louise DeGrafinried ordered the state troopers to put down their guns so that her guest could surrender.

Later, press from around the world interviewed her. She became a heroine. What do you think?—Was Louise DeGrafinried just lucky, or does she show us what it means to claim Jesus as truly our resurrection and life

Riley Arzeneaux returned to prison for the next 11 years, but the two of them kept writing to one another. **“Untie him, and let him go free.”** In 1995, when he was paroled, Mrs. DeGrafinried spoke on his behalf. And, when she died in 1998, her family asked Riley Arzeneaux to be one of her pallbearers. **“I am the resurrection and life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”**

**“I tried to put fear in her, but I couldn’t....She saved my life; I know she did. And she taught me that love is more powerful than revenge, retaliation and hate.”** As Lent nears its climax, Friends, we pray that this Gospel story may become such a part of us as it did to that Louise DeGrafinried. In a moment of crisis, she was able to pull up the shortest verse in the Bible from this story about Lazarus being raised from the tomb: **“Jesus wept.”** Way back in the 4<sup>th</sup> century the great bishop St. John Chrysostom taught that Jesus had the same grief and anguish here in today’s Gospel as what came over him in the Garden of Gethsemane. (2) *There* he was facing his own imminent death, and we’ll hear that story next Sunday, Palm Sunday.

Like Louise DeGrafinried, we know how the story will play out. **“I am the resurrection and the life,”** so Jesus teaches us this Sunday, and we shall celebrate the fullness of that mystery in the coming days. Mrs. DeGrafinried knew *her* resurrection and life, and she showed it. By the grace of these coming days, may we show it, too!

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(1) See for the quotations “Woman, 73, Gets Armed Fugitive to Give Up by ‘Giving Him Bible’”, in New York Times, February 22, 1984. Also, “Paschal Hospitality,” by Jim Forest, May 16, 2011 @Incommunion.org.

(2) As noted by Raymond E. Brown, The Gospel according to John (i-xii): Introduction, Translation, and Notes (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), pg. 435.