

“Saints Alive”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade
All Saints Sunday
Scripture: John 11:32-44
Revelation 21:1-6

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Holy God, as we hear and think about your word to us today, remind us we are apart of the communion of saints, stretching long before and long after us. Remind us, too, that our lives rest in you. Amen.*

Have you ever noticed how many cars you see these days which have prominently displayed on the back window a memorial to a lost loved? Have you noticed, too, a plethora of memorials along roads and highways indicating that in this place someone lost his or her life? Whether the memorial is on a car or along a road, it will usually list the name, birth and death dates, as well as a slogan of remembrance, noting that this person would be loved forever and never forgotten.

It is likely that this practice started in the African American community. As James H. Evans, Jr. notes in his book, “We Have Been Believers”, “in traditional African societies, the death of a member of the community does not portend the end of the life but the passage from one phase of participation in this community to another. When a person dies he or she lives on as part of the community as long as relatives and friends remember his or her name. These remembered ones, or ancestors, participate in a kind of personal immortality.”

This thought mirrors the Christian practice of All Saints’ Day – a day set aside to remember the saints and martyrs who have gone before us into God’s glory. We’ve been celebrating this day since the fourth century as a feast of All Martyrs. It is this feast, or communion, which continues to link us to the

Christians who have gone before us. Whenever the Lord’s Supper is celebrated, on this day or any day, we are called to remember, not just Jesus and his sacrifice, but all of those who followed in Christ’s footsteps and stood strong in the faith in the face of persecution and death. As we partake of the bread and wine, we are joined by their spirits and strengthened by their witness.

In the meantime, God promises to end our mourning and grief – he will “wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more...” Because those who have left us in body have joined us in spirit, we are never without them – never without their memory, their influence or their ultimate presence. Instead, God emphasizes the fullness of life as opposed to the finality of death. When we enter fully into life, we find that thoughts of death melt away as we tend to the needs and joys of those around us.

Once, when asked about what happens after we die, C.S. Lewis said that he was confident, on the basis of his experience of God in this life, that the same God who had so sought him, and hounded him, and found him in life would do the same in death. Our thinking about death should not be like that moment when God says, “It has been nice to know you – so long”, but rather, “Gotcha!”

When we gather as a community on All Saints’ Sunday, we are not making light of death. Rather, we simply hope to put death in the proper perspective. Comedian Woody Allen once said that’ it’s impossible to whistle a tune while pondering one’s own death. And yet that is exactly what we want to do on the All Saints’ Day. We are not going to whistle, but we’re going to put death in its place. We want see death in the light of an empty tomb. The story of the raising of Lazarus helps us to do just that.

We can appreciate Mary’s plaintive plea when she first saw Jesus after her brother’s

death. She fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” We can feel her grief, because most of us have been there. Whether the one for whom we grieve is a young mother who succumbed to cancer, a young man taken much too early in an automobile accident, a child snatched from the dreams his or her parents had, or an older person whose death was anticipated. Mary’s attitude was natural. Mary had seen Jesus’ healing power at work. She knew that if the Master had been there and had willed it, Lazarus would still be alive.

Life’s mysteries are too great for us, aren’t they? That’s why the story of Lazarus is so important. Not because it increases our understanding of suffering and death. We still understand very little about these intruders. We treasure this story because it increases our faith, our sense of trust, our confidence about God’s love in the presence of life and of death.

When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the friends who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled, says the writer of John. “Where have you laid him?” he asked.

Come and see, Lord,” they replied.

And then we come to the shortest verse in scripture: “Jesus wept.” It’s short, but it’s vitally important, “Jesus wept.” Where would we be if we could not believe God cares about our suffering and loss? Fortunately this is not the end of the story.

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. Doesn’t that sound familiar? Jesus’ own grave in not too distant a future would be covered with a large stone. “Take away the stone,” he said.

‘But, Lord,’ said Martha, the sister of Mary and Lazarus, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there for four days.” You remember Martha, don’t you? She was the

practical one in the family who complained about her sister sitting at the feet of Jesus while she did all the work. Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

After saying a prayer, Jesus called out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” And Lazarus came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.” What a powerful conclusion to our story. Our Lord has power over life and death.

We need to understand, however, why Jesus performed this miracle of the raising of Lazarus. It was not to give Mary and Martha their brother back. Jesus cared about Mary and Martha, but no more than Jesus cares about each and every person in the world. If caring were the reason Jesus raised Lazarus, every cemetery in the world would be empty, and the world would be unbelievably over crowded. Death has a purpose in God’s world, a purpose that we will fully understand only when we are in God’s presence in our own resurrected bodies.

The answer to why Jesus raised Lazarus is found in Jesus’ prayer: “Father”, he said, “I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”

Lazarus was raised from the dead so that you and I would know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. If Jesus has the power over life and death, we need not fear anything. We can trust him with our lives; we can trust him with the lives of our loved ones. He, who wept at the graveside of a friend, has power over life and death. The story of the raising of Lazarus is a foretaste of the raising of Jesus.

And as the writer of Revelation hinted in today’s passage from Revelation, God promises a whole new world, a radical discontinuity with the pain and frustration of life in this world,

discontinuity which occurs because we are now near God in a healed, restored, wonderfully refashioned world. In that new creation God will wipe away every tear from every eye and there will be no more sadness, no more grief and death because of God’s gift of a new heaven and a new earth. Like Jesus calling Lazarus from the tomb, God shall call each of us forth into new life, calling us by name. Our destiny is God’s eternal remembrance of us – each and every one of us – in our death, so that we might live. And on the basis of what we have known of God here in this world, we can believe that what might seem like a conclusion will be in reality a commencement. We can fully expect the God who so sought us in life to say to us even in death, “Yes, the face is familiar. I remember you. I’ve got a whole new world to show you. Wait until you see this. I have yet to give up on you. We’ve got all the time in the world.”

Tears and wailing are appropriate responses from loved ones when the sting of death strikes their beloved. And yet, in a spectacular miracle of God, the same God who raised dead Jesus somehow reaches in, defeats the enemy of death, and takes us along as well.

And as the liturgy we hear at all of our memorial services says, “So then whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. Saints Alive! May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

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