

SAINTS UNBOUND

All Saints Sunday – B November 4, 2018

Isaiah 25:6-9; Revelation 21:1-6a,

John 11:32-44

“Unbind him and let him go!” In the last and greatest of Jesus’ signs in the Gospel of John, this last command sounds almost like a “clean-up” detail. After all, a dead man just walked out of his own tomb. Jesus commanded him back to life. Yet, emerging from the tomb isn’t what marks the completion of this miracle, but rather the action required of the witnesses, to take away the death cloths; thus setting Lazarus free to move, to see, to touch, and to re-join the ones he loved.

Biblical scholar and Pastor David Lose asked of this reading from John’s gospel: “Why this story of the raising of Lazarus for All Saints Sunday?” He went on to suggest how we might identify with the different characters in the story; even more important, he asks how each one helps us understand what it means to be a saint. [“Dear Partner,” *In the Meantime*, www.davidlose.net, posted October 30, 2018.]

Mary, brokenhearted, proclaimed: “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.” Her words echo the shock, sadness, and even anger we carry with us when someone we love has just died. Mary didn’t dismiss Jesus with her words, but rather, in my opinion, grasped at the hope that Jesus would help her to understand, and help her to move forward.

The evangelist writes more than once that Jesus was greatly moved and disturbed: that is, he identified with the grief of his friends, and at that very human moment, he began to weep.

Martha, who had met Jesus earlier on the way into town, also had expressed her distress that Jesus hadn’t made it there in time. Her words of grief became a confession of faith [Matthew 11:24-27]; she believed Jesus was the promised Messiah. She believed that if anyone could bring hope out of this tragedy, it would be Jesus.

Lazarus, amazingly brought back to life, stumbling out of the tomb, was certainly a recipient of God’s grace in Jesus; and that is a good definition of what it means to be a saint. Once stripped of the bands of cloth, he can now resume his relationships and return to his community.

Jesus had raised Lazarus; but that also was the act that set the plot for his own death into motion. As God who became human flesh, Jesus was evidence of the new heaven and new earth. God’s home had indeed become among mortals. The religious authorities, fearing a loss of their authority and chaos that could precipitate the Romans destroying the nation and its Temple, plotted Jesus’ death. Likewise, they conspired to have Lazarus—living evidence of Jesus’ power—eliminated.

What is it like to live as a saint? It means that, while life can overwhelm us and death can threaten us, we live in the knowledge that they do not have the last word over us. Even the witnesses, who helped unbind Lazarus after he emerged from the tomb, were saints who had witnessed God’s power in Jesus. They believed, and they helped, in their own way, to bring the sign of God’s presence to its completion.

The Feast of All Saints is a day that the church remembers its loved ones, especially those who have had a significant impact on our lives. We honor those who have passed on the faith to us. We cherish those with whom we have had relationships of love. Even so, the grief never completely goes away: death brings disturbance to our lives (as Jesus himself was disturbed), and the absence of those loved ones forces us to find our way in the midst of that new reality.

In spite of those realities and finalities, the prophet Isaiah painted the bigger picture for us: God's ultimate vision for creation. Death will be swallowed up forever. "Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces." [Isaiah 25:7-8]

Lest you fear those tears of grief will be dried too quickly, the psalmist paints another beautiful picture. "You have noted my lamentation; put my tears into your bottle; are they not recorded in your book?" [Psalm 56:8]

The Rev. Dr. Tito Madrazo, of Duke University, writes: "God's esteem for our tears is an acknowledgement that our sorrow and our very lives are precious in God's eyes." [The Christian Century, "Sunday's Coming," October 29, 2018]

The image of God collecting our tears means that God doesn't dismiss our sadness but joins us in our journey through the darkest moments and places where tears are shed: be it a synagogue, a yoga club, a store, a nightclub, our nation's border, or in the desert where troops are stationed.

God knows our sorrows. Yet God *calls us*—even in the midst of our own process of healing—to bind up the brokenhearted with bandages of love and support, grace and recovery. At the same time God is loosening the death wraps that hold us back and keep us bound in sin and sadness.

This Feast of the Saints is both a memorial day in the church and a proclamation of the Easter promise. "Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." [Revelation 21:4] God proclaims: "It is done!" These terrible things will not define my people, nor will my people be held back. Unbind [them] and let them go! Amen.

Holy Gospel — John 11:32-44

³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” ³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I 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.” ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”