

## **November 7, 2021. Rev. Katheryn McGinnis. All Saints Day**

Let us pray,

Let the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. As we approach your word, may we be ready to receive the message you intend for us today. Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from the gospel of John, chapter 11, verse 32 through 44. Listen now for the word of the lord.

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

### **The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

We turn to a familiar passage on this All Saints Sunday: Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. And it is rather appropriate to read this story: a story where Jesus raises someone from the dead - on a day we remember the saints of our own community whom we have lost this past year.

Yes, We read the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from death, today, as a reminder that the lives of those we have lost bear witness to a hope rooted in the gospel that proclaims God’s victory over death.

But, upon reading this passage, hearing this story: it may also cause us to wonder: what does it mean that Christ has defeated death, that Christ is able to raise someone from the grave - if we are here today, remembering those among us who *have* died?

Death is peculiar, or maybe better said, death is uncomfortable, for us Christians.

There is the reality of death we all face. But then there is the hope in Christ's resurrection. And these two often seem to be at odds with each other.

How can we face the reality of death if we believe in and have hope in the resurrection?

How can we believe and have hope in the resurrection when faced with the universal reality of death?

In our scripture for this morning, John paints a vibrant scene in the story of Jesus raising Lazarus.

There are the very physical descriptions of death - the tomb, the cave, the stone, the smell, the wrappings of cloth.

Then there are the intense emotions of Mary and the crowd, both weeping.

The dialogue all throughout is strong and accusatory - between Mary and Jesus, Jesus and the crowd, Jesus and God, and finally Jesus and Lazarus - it all makes for a vivid picture, painted right in front of you, that you feel as though you can reach out and touch.

And at the heart of it all - what's perhaps most vivid - is the intense emotion of Jesus. In Verse 33 - Jesus was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. In Verse 35 - Jesus begins to weep.

Verse 38 - Jesus is disturbed again. Throughout the narrative Jesus is emotionally distraught, weeping, and deeply moved.

Our translations say disturbed, but a more accurate translation from the greek emphasizes the anger behind it. Jesus is disturbed, angry, and weeping.

Traditional scholarship doesn't really know what to do with a weeping, disturbed, angry, and deeply moved Jesus.

Traditional christian theology sees God as one whose perfection leaves God unaffected by the moods and feelings and circumstances of the created order.

When there is emotion - they explain it away. For example, Calvin argues that biblical references to divine emotion need to be interpreted as anthropomorphisms (or attributing human traits to non humans) intended to convey what is ultimately incomprehensible.

But yet, here is God in flesh, weeping and angry. Some try to explain it by interpreting it as Christ's anger towards Mary - who says her brother wouldn't have died if Christ was there. Thus Mary does not understand Christ's glory that is about to unfold.

Christ's weeping/anger lets us, the reader, know that.

Others say this emotion is directed towards the crowd who say why he could not have saved this man if he could do other miracles - again they do not understand Christ's glory and the weeping/anger lets us know that.

Or maybe it is as simple as it seems - that Jesus loved Lazarus. And he is weeping in grief. And he was actually moved in human emotion.

Whatever the interpretation - the implication is clear: in this passage God is not an unaffected God, but a deeply affected God - affected by the suffering and loss of Lazarus, this world.

To face death, is to be affected by it. To feel it. To grieve it.

When I did an internship as a hospital chaplain I knew I would face a lot of death. I was always so worried about what to say to the families who just lost their loved one - hoping that I could say the right thing to make it all better or ease the pain of death. Terrified I would say the wrong thing and make it all so much worse.

But as the internship went on, I came to learn that my job as a chaplain was less about saying the right thing or the wrong thing - or really saying anything - and more about protecting people's right to grieve those they had lost. To face death, and be affected by it.

When Jesus weeps, he shows us how to respond to death: with grief. To weep ourselves when facing death, or to step into the grief of those we love when they are struggling.

No perfect words are required - just the empathy to step into their grief and weep.

And yet Christ is life - is the hope of resurrection - the victor of death - thus why does he weep?

He knows he is about to literally defeat death and command Lazarus come out of the tomb, alive.

When we think of Christ defeating death, we often think about it in the future tense.

There *will come* a day when death will be no more and we all join in eternal life with God. Therefore we endure this life of death and suffering until that glorious day where all the pain will be no more.

But when Jesus weeps at Lazarus's death, Christ shows a different way to interpret his defeat over death: not in a way that diminishes this future hope, but in a way that shows us this hope here and now. This very moment.

For through Christ, we see that defeating death does not mean we do not face it, that we are not affected by it.

Both Lazarus, and later Jesus do face death - their family and loved ones are affected by it.

But rather, when Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb into life - Jesus reminds us that Christ is the eternal life.

Both right here and now. And when we die. Christ defeating death means that even death cannot separate us from eternal life with God.

Just as Jesus says “unbind him!” after Lazarus is raised - we too are unbound from death here and now. And instead bound to God. In this life and when we die.

And so we take comfort knowing that on both sides of the grave we are God’s own, for Christ is the victor of death.

On All Saints day, we remember those who have died, our saints, as we did earlier in this service: and we honor them.

For through them, and in their lives, we have seen the glory of God.

We stand on their shoulders, and on the shoulders of the all the saints for thousands of years that have led us here today as a reminder that we are all part of a continuing living communion of saints.

And their lives do bear witness to a hope rooted in the gospel that proclaims God’s victory over death. But that hope is not only a future, far off hope: but a radical reality here and now.

A reality that acknowledges pain of death, the universality of the death we will all experience,

But God’s victory over death means God steps into that reality, and weeps with us. Christ is our own Chaplain who teaches us how to grieve. And then, carrying that grief - brings us back into life.

For Christ is the everlasting life - both here and now, in what has come, and what will come. Death is defeated. We will face it, feel it, be affected by it - but it will not separate us from God and eternal life.

Death is not the end, just perhaps a bump on the journey that is rooted in Christ.

Brian Peterson describes it beautifully: “This is what All Saints Day is for: not just to remember those from long ago or those whose deaths are still painfully near, and not just to point ahead to that ultimate promise of resurrection, though both are true and important: but this day is about what all God’s saints have known and experienced, that here and now there is no death or grief or fear so deep and dark that the voice of Jesus cannot reach into it, call us out, and bring life.”

We rejoice: knowing that neither death nor life, things present nor things to come, can separate us - the whole communion of saints, from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

So How can we face the reality of death if we believe in and have hope in the resurrection?

How can we believe and have hope in the resurrection when faced with the universal reality of death? We can, and we do, because Christ is eternal life: Given to us here and now. and not even death, though we do face it and feel it and grieve it- no not even death can stop Christ from calling us out of the cave to live unbound, now and eternally, in Christ’s glory.

And for that, thanks be to God. Amen,