

## ALL SAINTS SUNDAY, YEAR B

John 11:32-44

Dear Saints of God!

This morning we find ourselves in a cemetery. Maybe it's not the place you thought you would be, or want to be, but it's where the gospel places us on this All Saints' Sunday. Jesus had missed Lazarus' funeral. Talk about lapsed pastoral care, I'm afraid Jesus' actions are a bit questionable. He wasn't there for Mary and Martha even though they had requested him to come. He was off doing his thing across the Jordan and he missed the funeral. As a matter of fact, he didn't make it back to Bethany for four long days. By that time, Lazarus' body was decomposing, and as scripture tells us bluntly, the tomb was stinking from rotting flesh.

When Jesus does show up, our gospel lesson tells us that Mary reverently knelt before him. I have to believe, however, that her words were filled with deep disappointment, tinged with anger rather than awe: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Maybe this was not the "sit-at-his-feet and admire Jesus" kind of Mary. Just maybe, this was the perturbed, disturbed, angry, caught in the middle of grief, utterly devastated Mary. She felt let down by this friend whom she thought was God's messenger.

Can you feel her plight? Her disappointment? Her anger? Have you ever felt alone, deserted by God when you needed help the most? Have you stood at the casket of a loved one or friend and wondered, "God where are you? Why did this have to happen? And so quickly? How can I go on when I feel like my Savior isn't even here?" Let me assure you—at one time or another, we have all felt betrayed. Is that too strong a word? We receive the gift of faith and invest ourselves in commitment and discipleship but when the chips are down and we're falling apart, we don't feel the love and protection and strength of God's presence. Even if John says Jesus arrived late so that God's glory could be shown, I want to hear what he has to say to me. Jesus, why did you let me down? Why weren't you here?

When Jesus sees Mary's pain, he's overcome with grief. The writer wants us to know how deeply Jesus felt. In fact, he's in a state of anguish, mentally and spiritually. He breaks down crying. He loved Lazarus! He loved Mary! He loved Martha! He didn't want them to suffer this loss.

You all know what happens next. I can't help but wonder, is it cruel to hear this miracle ending when our loss seems irreversible? Jesus raised Lazarus that day in dramatic fashion, but he isn't going to bring our loved ones back! No, not today! But this sign—this last miracle Jesus performed before his death—infers that he will one day. One day we will be given new bodies, perfect in every way. One day, you and I and all the saints, will be called from our resting places. One day we will hear Jesus' call, "Lazarus, come out!"

The raising of Lazarus is a sign to all believers to hang on! The seemingly impossible is possible for God. The forlorn scene in the cemetery turns into a joyful reunion where even the burial clothes of Lazarus are stripped away to reveal a living, breathing child of God. Jesus was not making up for his absence; this miracle, as interpreted by the gospel writer, was not Jesus' way of saying, "Mary and Martha, I'm sorry I wasn't here." His anguish and pain and tears may have carried overtones of that; but no, Jesus was doing something new! In that cemetery he brought life out of death. He demonstrated that he is the beginning and end of all things. That he is truly Resurrection and Life. That, when we think we are at a dead end, we are deeply mistaken.

Jesus is not in the business of betraying us, or disappointing us, or intentionally hurting us. In fact, as our second lesson says, he is God with us. He himself will wipe every tear from our eyes. And as our first

lesson from Isaiah so graphically puts it, at the great banquet to come, when death is brought out on a platter, Jesus will eat death alive. He will put an end to our mourning, our crying, and our pain.

This miracle of the raising of Lazarus was the beginning of the end for our Lord. It was used as evidence against him by the authorities who were determined to see him crucified so their nation could survive. The cemetery where Lazarus was buried reminds us of another cemetery and another tomb. Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night, and other believers took his body down from the cross, rubbed it with burial spices to cut down the stench, wrapped it in a linen cloth and lovingly laid our Savior's body in a tomb. If I were to guess, Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus, were there the day he died.

All of us bring today, to this place, memories of God's saints who now rest in the Lord. I remember my brother-in-law Pete, whose funeral was held this past Monday. Pete came to this country as a German immigrant when he was a teenager and came to know my sister through Luther League. Pete was willing to help anyone and did.

The first thing Pete did when we got together was pour me a glass of bourbon! In German they call it, "Gemütlichkeit." It's the mix of feelings you get when you are with your friends in a beer garden: joy, togetherness, warmth, security. My family mourns Pete's death today and, like you, holds on to the promise of heavenly "Gemütlichkeit."

We profess in the creed that we believe in the "communion of saints." When we receive the body and blood of Jesus, we are not alone or deserted. For all the saints are here, from every time and place. In this meal we experience that there is more to life than loss and disappointment. There is the great feast ahead. There is the heavenly Jerusalem coming down from above. There are the nations of the world streaming to the mountain of the Lord! But there is more, much more.

He is here with us. The Resurrection and the Life. Here Jesus encourages us to be Easter people, to live with conviction and confidence, to adore God with our lives. Here Jesus calls us from the dark places of our existence, from the tombs that we have constructed for ourselves or in which we find ourselves trapped. From grief and despair, depression and complacency, sin and guilt, Jesus says to you and to me, "Come out and live!"

"Unbind them!" he orders.

"Unbind this church! This community of believers! Let them go free!" "Unbind every worshiper, every last one of them! Let them be free to give of themselves, their skills and resources."

"Unbind these saints of God! Let them live as forgiven sinners, released from guilt and everything that holds them back!"

"Unbind them!"

Yes, we find ourselves in a cemetery today, but we are not to remain there. This is a day to celebrate life! The life everlasting, yes! But also the life that Jesus gives to his saints, right here, right now!

So rise up, you saints of God! Rise up and live your faith!