

## The Saints Unbound

A Sermon for the Feast of All Saints' Day, transferred

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*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." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"*

*Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 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." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. 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." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 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." John 11:32-44*

This beautiful gospel story probably stirs up all kinds of feelings for all of us. Feelings of loss and love, grief and joy. Lazarus had died and his sisters and friends were grieving. Mary and the Jews there with her were weeping. Jesus was so disturbed in spirit, so greatly moved, that he began to weep. It was a time of great loss, a time when things seemed hopeless. We've all been there. Whether death came to a loved one, a dream, or a way of life. Lord, if you had been here.

Maybe you can imagine yourself as someone in this story - Mary or Martha, as a member of the crowd, or even Lazarus. Mary was lost in questions of "if only" and was probably second guessing every action she (and Jesus) made or did not make that might have caused or prevented the death of Lazarus. Some of us do this for a long time after a tragedy or loss.

Martha was, as usual, consumed with the practicalities of the moment, distracted by how many days it had been, how after four days there was no more hope, how the stench of death hung like a pall over everything. Some of us react to loss as Martha did, staying busy so that we won't have to think about what comes next, about how life is going to be going forward.

And the crowd was filled with mixed emotions. Some of them were weeping, and others were accusing Jesus of not being Jesus, needing a place to put their grief and anger at the death of their beloved Lazarus. Grief, anger, and blame are emotions often present when we have lost someone or something dear to us.

And then there was Lazarus, four days dead and in the tomb. What hope was there? And yet, Jesus called him to new life, and called the community to unbind him of all that had enshrouded him. When someone or something we love has died, we can feel bound up and entombed right along with them for some time. And we need the help of our family, friends, and faith community to unbind us from our grief.

This is where the power of the Resurrection calls us to come out of our tombs of grief, out of our ways of life that are killing us, out of our past that continues to bind us. And perhaps Jesus is speaking here, not only of the death of loved ones, but of the many deaths throughout our lives; those things that did not come to pass, those losses of opportunity or relationships or invitations to new life.

This is where the power of the Resurrection calls us as the church to come out of our pandemic tomb. Jesus said to Martha, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” Jesus says this to us over and over and is saying it to the church today.

What is your Lazarus? And if you can name it, do you believe that God will raise, will unbind, will breathe new life into it? Because to believe is to be a saint. The heroic actions and holy lives of the saints flow out of believing in the power of God to transform us. Following Jesus out of whatever tomb holds us captive will bring us into new life.

In the earliest days of the Church, all baptized Christians were referred to as saints. We might think that saints are people of extraordinary virtue, people who end up in stained glass windows and are assigned holy days on the church calendar. Lazarus, Mary, Martha, and those followers of Jesus in the crowd were all saints.

Do you think of yourself as a saint? We might not always be good or obedient, but we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever at baptism. We have been made holy. On the Feast of All Saints we are invited to remember not only the famous women and men of Christian virtue through the ages, but also the saints we have known and loved – grandparents, spouses, siblings, children, the friend next door, or a beloved teacher; people who will never be famous but who have made a difference in our lives.

Saints are the people we know who inspire us to be our best selves, to love God and neighbor, to give generously, to care for those on the margins; they show us how to become saints. They have embodied love and grace for us and point us to God. And when they have moved into the nearer presence of God we grieve, yet we know that only a thin veil separates us. This is how we experience the Communion of Saints, seen and unseen, as lives that have been changed, not ended.

The saints who have gone before us have handed on to us our faith and our church. They have believed, acted on their beliefs, and they surround us with love. We too can believe in the power of the Resurrection, we can be called from our tombs of fear and loss, and can unbind one another to walk toward what awaits us. May we remember our saints, as we pray a Jewish prayer by Sylvan Kamens and Rabbi Jack Riemer -

At the rising sun and at its going down; we remember them.

At the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter; we remember them.

At the opening of the buds and in the rebirth of spring; we remember them.

At the blueness of the skies and in the warmth of summer; we remember them.

At the rustling of the leaves and in the beauty of the autumn; we remember them.

At the beginning of the year and when it ends; we remember them.

As long as we live, they too will live, for they are now a part of us as we remember them.

When we are weary and in need of strength; we remember them.

When we are lost and sick at heart; we remember them.

When we have decisions that are difficult to make; we remember them.

When we have joy we crave to share; we remember them.

When we have achievements that are based on theirs; we remember them.

For as long as we live, they too will live,

for they are now a part of us as, we remember them.

Amen.