

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
November 5, 2023
John 11: 32-44
All Saints Sunday

“An All Saints Sermon”

On the first Sunday of November for more than a thousand years, the Christian church has remembered and given God thanks "for all the saints who from their labors rest", as the great hymn says.

I once met a UCC minister who said that All Saints Day is one of her favorite days to preach because it gives her permission to preach about death, a subject she finds important to address but that her congregation really doesn't want to hear about on Sunday mornings. But death is a part of life. And one of the most important pieces of our ministry which doesn't always go noticed but your pastors engage in regularly, is that we help families move through the loss of a loved one, and we do it often.

Death is a constant in every culture and every age, and it happens to everyone. Throughout history different cultures have created rituals and ceremonies to give meaning to a person's life and death. Here in the US, those rituals can look very different depending on what part of the country you're in; and the pandemic changed things greatly in how we practice some of those rituals. I've also noticed a change the last few years in what we call a memorial service. Nowadays they are often referred to as a celebration of life. Have you noticed that? It's like the mention of death is too taboo. But in the church, my friends, we do not avoid the mention of death. We have something to say at the time of death. We affirm what our brief statement of faith proclaims, that in life and in death we belong to God; that nothing can separate us from the love of God, not even death; and we hold fast to the Easter promise of eternal life. Because we believe as we see in the Lazarus story that death isn't the final word. Life is the final word; indeed, the hope and love we find in God is always the final word.

But do you believe this? That's what Jesus asks Martha and it's a fair question. *Do you believe this?* Do you live your life like you believe this?

Mary, Martha and Lazarus were dear friends of Jesus. Jesus often stayed at their home when he was in Bethany and, as his own life comes to an end, Jesus will stay with them every night until he dies. The Gospel of John tells us Jesus loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus, which is the only time John names specific people Jesus loved. The four of them were friends; good friends.

Lazarus becomes gravely ill. So Mary and Martha send word to Jesus to come, not only because they want Jesus to know that his friend is ill, but also because they believe Jesus can cure him. Yet when Jesus gets word of Lazarus' illness, he does something odd—he stays where he is for two whole days. One would think that Jesus would drop everything he's doing and run to Lazarus' bedside, but he doesn't. He waits.

When he does decide its time to go to Bethany, the disciples aren't happy about it, because it's dangerous there. Bethany is only two miles outside Jerusalem, and Jesus is already receiving death threats. But Jesus sets out for Bethany despite all of that and, sure enough, when he gets there he learns that Lazarus has been dead for four days. Friends of the family have already gathered at their home and, as people are wont to do in these situations, they've brought food and are trying to say comforting things to the grieving sisters. And they, too, are crying and grieving the loss of Lazarus.

Now, when Martha sees Jesus coming down the road, she is not happy. In fact, she's angry. "Greatly disturbed" is the nice way the Bible puts it. She tells Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." In other words, you could have prevented this! If you hadn't of spent those two extra days doing Lord knows what and had come when I asked you to come, Lazarus wouldn't be dead in that tomb.

But Martha's pain is also intertwined with her faith, and her faith in God tells her that there may still be hope, because God is faithful. So Martha

says to Jesus, "I know God will give you whatever you ask of him." She's hoping against all hope that Jesus will perform a miracle. She's seen him perform plenty, so she knows he can do it.

"Your brother will rise again," Jesus tells her.

They're comforting words, but not exactly the words Martha was hoping for.

"I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day," she says. Conventional Jewish belief taught her that the dead would stay dead until the world came to end. She may as well have said, "Of course. What was I thinking expecting you to bring back to life something that is dead?"

But Jesus gently corrects Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Do you believe this?

"Yes, I believe," she says. "I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Martha affirms her faith. Martha believes against all odds. Martha believes not because of the facts, but in spite of the facts.

But What if she had said, "No. No, I don't believe." Would it have changed the outcome for Lazarus? Would Jesus have changed his mind and gone on back to what he'd been doing during those two days he dallied?

No, I don't think so. I think Jesus would have still raised Lazarus from the dead. What would have changed was Martha's view of life. She would have gone from believing that the life, hope, and comfort we find in God is boundless, to believing that hope has boundaries, that death is the final word.

She would have lived in the state of “yes, but” or “if only”. And those are states that so many people know all too well. Yes, I believe, but . . . There’s a qualifier . . . Yes, but . . .

We say we believe, but we can’t quite give ourselves and our lives (or our churches) over to the transformation and new life that God brings. Something holds us back. We say we believe, but we don’t always live our lives like we believe. We hold back . . . Fear, anxiety, an unwillingness to change, or let go -- get in our way. Yes I believe, but. . .

Friends, I can’t tell you how many people of faith I’ve met who live as though they’re functional atheists. I can’t tell you how many churches I’ve come across who do the same. Having bought into the corporate mindset that there is never enough, they do anything but live. Diana Butler Bass says that “the point isn’t that you believe in the resurrection. Any fool can believe in a resurrection from the dead. The point is that you trust in the resurrection. And that’s much, much harder to do.”

Remember what Mary and Martha both said? “Lord, if only you had been here,” our brother would not have died. Lord, if only. If only. If only we’d made that phone call, sent that letter, not sent that e-mail, taken that job; invested differently; said the right words; if only we were richer or thinner or taller or smaller or bigger . . . How many hours a week, a month, a year, do we spend on the "if only" game?

Jesus doesn’t want us to live in the state of “yes, but” or “if only”. Jesus offers us life now, a rich and full life now. “I have come,” Jesus said, “that my life, my joy, may live in you. Do you believe this?”

Friends, as people of faith we are resurrection people, and we believe that life has power over death. Somehow, some way, life always triumphs over death. “I am the resurrection and the life, Jesus said. Whoever believes in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” This is not pie in the sky thinking; this is the bedrock of our faith. And so on this All Saints Sunday, I issue a challenge:

- Do not sing alleluia and then live as if Jesus never left the tomb.
- Do not relegate the tragedies of our time to the category of inevitable, insurmountable and beyond hope.
- Don't recite the correct faith statement, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day ... I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." But then fail to act on that belief.
- Do not ignore Jesus' command to move the stone.
- And do not neglect to unbind the ones Jesus has called forth from the grave.

Instead, dare to believe in the resurrection and live your life like you do. dare to have the audacity to proclaim that death, destruction, violence, and pain aren't ultimate. dare to believe in what much of the world says is impossible and then live in ways that reflect that radical belief: that death is never the final word. That hope always bats last.

Marian Wright Edelman said once: "Do not die before you die. See and listen. Bask in the countless miracles and beauty all around you. Stay awake and alert to the incredible currents of life everywhere" (*The Sea Is So Wide and My Boat Is So Small*, p.57).

Henry David Thoreau said he wished to learn what life had to teach now "and not when I come to die, discover that I had not lived" (Francis Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus*, p. 87).

God doesn't want us to live in the state of "yes, but" and "if only" wrapped up in grave clothes like Lazarus. Not as a church, and not as individuals. Jesus unbound Lazarus from the strips of cloth that wrapped him up in a dark existence; and Jesus unbinds us, too.

A long time ago, in a place called Bethany, Jesus stood outside the tomb and called out, "Lazarus, come out!" And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. And Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

This is both our mandate and marching orders, for the God who answered Jesus' prayer in bringing Lazarus back from the dead, the God who raised Jesus from death, the God who promises us life eternal... this God is not finished with us yet! And we are the instruments of God's resurrection life, grace, and power here and now. As our retiring Executive Presbyter said on Wednesday in his sermon, "The stakes have never been higher to share the love of God with this weary world."

May it always be so.

Amen.

O God, before whom the generations rise and pass away: we rejoice today in the communion of saints, in the remembrance of friends and loved ones who once walked with us in mutual love. We are thankful for every precious memory of their goodness and sustained by contributions each made to our common life. Our faith that Christ lives brings us the assurance that we are not separate in your boundless mercy. Renew us all in faith, hope, and love; that we may share more deeply the fullness of life with you that is not limited by time or space, or weakness of any kind. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

