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November 4, 2018
All Saints' Sunday

John 11:32-44
Isaiah 25:6-9
Psalm 24
Revelation 21:1-6a

What phrases stand out to you in our text from John this morning? Depending on what you might be going through, you may hear a range of phrases – some good, some not so good. Some uplifting and others accusatory. To me, this text includes such a rich portrayal of the emotions we all move through as humans, especially when it comes to our grief.

I find this text to be quite fitting for All Saints' Day, a day of remembrance for those who have gone before us. But All Saints' Day is something more than just a day of remembrance. It is also a day about all of us, those of us living in the present. So this morning, we are going to expand our reading of scripture to consider what All Saints' Day may have to offer us right here and right now.

With that in mind, here's your Christian education lesson for the day so that we can build a common context on which to proceed...The understanding of "saints" in the Christian tradition is that we are all saints – in the present, not just those in the past. It's a term that encompasses all believers – and that includes you and me. And, it isn't something we earn. Being a saint isn't about getting into some special club for Christian over achievers. Instead, this idea of a saint is actually a rather commonplace term that is used in the New Testament to define the whole church body. That understanding makes our reading from John an even richer text for All Saint's Day when we approach it with this more expansive understanding in place.

In other words, we will read this passage with an ear for what it has to teach us today, not just an account of a miracle that happened 2,000 years ago. So, what do you hear?

Maybe you hear a text that encompasses Mary's anger and blame. "Lord, if you had been here!"

Maybe you hear Martha's doubt. Lord, he has been dead for 4 days.

But, maybe you hear Jesus' confident hope for change and new life.

I think when we let our present day lives flow into this reading, we will all relate to it differently. For some of us it's often easier to be like Mary or Martha. To place blame or to doubt when faced with the dark times in our lives. But I don't want you to get stuck there – in the darkness. Because, this text that points a finger at God in anger also is the same text that gives us hope out of our darkness. It counters our tendency to blame and accuse when faced with adversity with a divine promise that is built upon active and impactful mercy and grace.

That mercy and grace that we are going to focus on is grounded in Christ's response to Mary and to Martha – with three powerful commands. Commands that are grounded above all in hope and provide us a message of faith that we need desperately in our world today.

1) Take away the stone. 2) Lazarus, Come out. And, 3) Unbind him and let him go.

The first thing I want you to notice is something critical about Jesus' strength of conviction. Jesus' commands grow out of his grief. That's important. I would argue that it is in fact, because of his grief that he is able to move forward with such power and conviction. He moves from his own place of darkness and despair, of his own weeping, to an unwavering proclamation of the value of life. In doing so, he shows us that he has walked those same paths we have of deep sadness; he has faced the same challenges of how to trust again after everything has fallen apart; and in the midst of it all Jesus has had to find strength and courage to have faith in the possibilities.

John presents to us the kind of advice you know is authentic because it comes from a place of experience. And, these three commands have so much to teach us about the value of our lives.

The first command Jesus gives is this – take away the stone. To me, this moment in scripture has a profound sense of anticipation. That moment when we have to dig down deep to have faith in the future. To have faith that God hears our prayers and is responding to our pain. It's the moment we recognize the dark place we have found ourselves in and are finally ready for something to change. You know those moments and so does Jesus. Jesus says to Lazarus and to all of you...I am going to make a path for you, a way out of the darkness and into the light, a place where you can start over. That's the command to roll back the stone. Just imagine hearing that Jesus believed in you so much that he would let nothing stand in your way of truly living. He wants to roll back that stone so that you can live. Jesus loves you.

The second command – Lazarus, come out. In saying these words Jesus ignores all of the naysayers. He takes time to reassure Martha. He prays to God and then with complete confidence he calls Lazarus out. He doesn't whisper it. He isn't timid or hesitant. He calls out in a loud voice that left no room for uncertainty. Lazarus – your life matters to me! Jesus had made ready the path and now he was ready for Lazarus to accept the love that was being so freely given. Jesus couldn't walk that path for Lazarus. Lazarus had to take those first steps on his own, to claim the value of his own life. It's the same way Christ wants each and every one of us to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that our lives have so much extraordinary value. And so he calls us to step forward. He wants us to love ourselves.

The third command – Unbind him and let him go. Notice that Jesus didn't unbind Lazarus himself. He called on others to help him. Yes, he expected Lazarus to step out of the darkness but Jesus created a support system of others to help him move again, to keep going after those first steps were made. Teaching us all that the value of human life is the responsibility of our entire community. We are to work together to uplift each other out of our hard times, out of our despair, out of our pain. The lesson is that you don't have to go through life alone. Jesus

never intended that. He calls on each of us to support the dignity of every human being. He wants to love our neighbors.

Do you see the movement of the text for All Saints' Day? It's the promise that Jesus loves us. He wants us to love ourselves. And, he wants us to love our neighbors. It's a beautiful lesson in what it truly means to be a saint in this world – here and now.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.