

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller
The Twenty-third Sunday After Pentecost
1 November 2015

Scripture readings:

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

Today is All Saints' Day, All Hallow's Day. The Eve of All Hallow's was yesterday - All Hallow's Even. That's where we get Halloween from. In a conversation with a very fine Christian man in the middle of the week we were talking about kids going out Halloweening, and he referred to the pagan holiday, and I thought, Man alive! You need to think a little bit harder about Christmas if you think Halloween is a pagan holiday! You know how all this stuff happens in the life of the Church. There were people who had ideas long before Christians were ever around, and they had very fixed holidays, a lot of them related to the changing of the seasons and the astronomy and all of the rest of it. Everybody's mystified about dying and death and the dead. Aren't we somehow? Those who pay attention to the Roman calendar know that tomorrow is All Souls' Day. Now what's the difference? Well, tomorrow you can remember anybody who's dead. Today is for saints and martyrs. Tomorrow we can include those in purgatory or in hell - *all* souls.

But God bless my buddy Frank. I couldn't believe this! He talked about the saints in our lives who may not be canonized by the Church but who communicate God's love to us with a smile, with an embrace, with a helping hand. He got it! And he said, "*siamo tutti uniti*" - we are all united. It's right! It's absolutely right! United by this love of God which we come to know, I firmly believe, most clearly as we reflect upon the life of Jesus.

These are challenging texts. The Revelation text I've read at almost every funeral I've ever celebrated. These are the funeral texts of the Church primarily - of promise and hope and new Jerusalem and new life. Often just the part of the gospel text: "*Surely, Lord, if you had been here, my brother had not died.*" At every one of those funerals it would have been fair to ask, "*Where is Jesus today, and why is Jesus not raising this beloved person from the grave the way he raised his dead friend that day?*" Have you ever thought of that?

Last night at dinner I said, "*Well, if you did such a good job, where is Lazarus today?*" And my dear friend said, "*He died.*" And I said, "*Well, that was a real favor, wasn't it. He got two chances to die!*" [laughter]

None of you were around in 1988 were you? [laughter] Certainly not old enough to either read books or go to the movies. Does the name Nikos Kazantzakis mean anything to you? He wrote a wonderful novel about the life of Jesus which raised hackles all over the place because of the suggestions about Jesus' relationship with people like Mary Magdalene. That was made by Martin Scorsese into a film, and there is a wonderful sequence in there of Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. It's very dramatic. I think there are probably some historical inaccuracies because I revisited the clip on YouTube and Lazarus comes out of the tomb with

both legs bound as if he's had leg surgery. Mummies had their legs bound together, didn't they? So how could a mummy walk out of a tomb? Oh, that's really too technical, isn't it? There comes Lazarus out of the tomb, pulls back the cloth from over his face and collapses into the arms of Jesus who loved him.

You remember the biblical data, don't you, from when you were a kid. What's the shortest verse in the Bible? "*Jesus wept.*" [laughter] And those of you who remember reading King James scripture, you know what the concern was about opening the tomb. "*Surely, Lord, by this time he stinketh.*" [laughter]

I think it's a fair question to ask: Why doesn't God do this for all of our friends what he did for Lazarus? And where are these kinds of miracles that authors of early Christian scriptures describe to us? And why don't they happen now?

Well, I think we sell miracles short when we describe them as the ability to suspend the natural order. You know my feelings on that pretty clearly by now. But there's got to be some meaning in this text about Jesus bothering to go to a cemetery and grieve with real live tears over this man whom he loved, this man who was very special to him. He and his sisters, one who was too busy to be pious and the other who was too pious to be busy. I always liked Martha better. I'm sorry. I really do. I appreciate help in the kitchen. [laughter] Talk about the Bible later. These dishes need to be done! [laughter] A family with whom the Lord was very, very close - a family for whom he could grieve when there was a death. And there is something to be learned about Jesus' relationship with them that I think the writer of this gospel may be attempting to communicate to us and to all who came afterwards who might read these accounts about the truth of human relationship and about the truth of loss and about the truth of God and where it is we find ourselves in relationship to God when we encounter the kind of loss that makes us truly grieve and cry.

And what are we being told? Well, the fact that Jesus loved Lazarus is interesting to me because just a couple weeks ago we read about the wealthy man who went to Jesus and said, "*What must I do to save my own hide?*" And Jesus says, "*Well, you know the Law. Obey the Law.*" And the man in his arrogant self-assurance said, "*I do.*" You know the kind. "*Well, I'm not that bad. I didn't do what she did.*" We know who we are. Jesus says, "*Well, if you want to save yourself, here's one for you. Sell everything you have and give it all to the poor.*" No tithing there. One hundred percent to the poor! Everything you have. I am not in that line, folks! I'll up my pledge by a couple bucks, but you're not getting everything! [laughter]

The point that Jesus was trying to make was, "*You're barking up the wrong tree. You cannot save yourself. God loves you enough. Stop worrying about what isn't a problem. You are saved by God's grace. Believe that and live as if you believe that.*" But he was dealing with this probably charming but religiously screwed-up, arrogant, self-righteous, wealthy, powerful, young, impudent - Who was that? Spiro Agnew, wasn't it - "*an elite corps of impudent snobs.*" Do you remember those days? Talking about hippies, I think. Impudent, arrogant, young, pious, self-righteous, religious, intolerable man. And scripture tells us that Jesus looks at him and doesn't fight with him, doesn't engage in an argument with him, doesn't have a theological discussion with him, doesn't cut him off at the ankles, doesn't do anything but love him. He

looked at him and loved him.

And I suppose that Lazarus didn't have any of those negative qualities, that Lazarus was a good and beautiful, sinful but much easier to take man, a dear, wonderful friend. And Jesus' response to him and the twit is the same. He looked at them both and loved them. Now the Church says about Jesus that this somehow is God incarnate, this man, and how we understand Jesus' response to these two very different people is important because it's the same response. And I suppose if Jesus ever got to the tomb of the rich young man we would have the second shortest verse in scripture again - that he wept. And I suppose when we dial up Jesus in our prayers with our list of what it is we want, that the Lord's first response is to look at us, weep perhaps, and love us.

And so Jesus goes to the tomb of his dear friend and knows that there was something there, something that couldn't die and that was divine. So instead of saying all that we buried is now dead and gone, Jesus calls back to himself the love and mutuality of that relationship and acknowledges publicly to this man's sister how very important this man was to him and says the love that we shared didn't die. It's eternal. Then he says to them, "*Unbind him and let him go.*" Take what is eternal and believe that it lasts forever, and let the other things of him go, that God has not died, that the relationship which you had with him was good and blessed and holy and this is what the saints are, the sustenance of the living. These are people who have received from God God's love and grace and who have shared it freely, undeservedly, completely with you, and your job is simply to believe that and do the same.

And so it is in Scandinavian churches - and by the way, they're all Lutheran. *[laughter]* It's a political reality even though when they get to the United States some of them become Methodists. *[laughter]* In Scandinavian churches there is an architectural idiom where all the altars are behind semi-circular altar rails. That's just a common ordinary reality in Scandinavian churches. And the explanation of that is that when the church comes to receive - and of course Lutherans in that part of the world and that kind of piety kneel at the altar - that that's only half of the church. The other half is the saints who are kneeling at the same altar.

Unbind that which was temporal. Unbind that which was physical. Accept and believe that which was eternal and divine, and let the other stuff go. But there is stuff that simply will not go, and that's the truth of the love of God for all people - the rich young twit and the darling Lazarus in the grave. Unbind that which is dead. Find that which is alive and eternal. And I firmly believe that that understanding of the importance of that relationship sustained Jesus until his last breath as well. And the miracle is not that a mummy came out of a tomb somewhere - that's a little too much Halloween for me - but that the love of God is, in fact, eternal and sustains us all.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.