

Death is real. Death is disruptive. Death is defiant in the face of our efforts to pin it down, to make it go away or even to make sense of it. Nothing about the story of Lazarus simplifies or romanticizes that reality. What the story of Lazarus offers is this: the story of Lazarus exposes us to the deeper reality that death is not God's final word.

This parish is going through a season of grieving. In less than a year, death has come for sons, for husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, for brothers and sisters, and for dear friends. Some of our loved ones had an opportunity to make peace with the end of life in this realm. But others seem to have been unfairly snatched away with no preparation, no peaceful resolve; taken from us too soon with too many experiences we expected to share with them. That's the kind of grief that Martha and Mary experienced with the death of their brother.

We have gathered to commend our loved ones into God's mercy so often in the past several months that we have heard sentiments like those expressed in the Wisdom reading and we have heard the reassuring promise of the Revelation passage and we have heard parts of the Lazarus story. But let me remind you of something that we heard in all of those liturgies that we did not hear this morning on this feast of All Saints.

When Martha went out to meet Jesus, she said to him: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." That's exactly what Mary said. They were both expressing sentiments that many of us have felt in the past few months wondering how God could let death take our friend or our child or our spouse. But before Jesus could respond, Martha added: "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask." Jesus told her that Lazarus would rise again and Martha accepted that this would come at the resurrection on the last day.

And it is here that Jesus gave us the words that we heard in all the liturgies for our loved ones and that must be heard again this morning: "I am resurrection

and I am life. Whoever has faith in me shall have life, even though they die. And everyone who has life, and has committed themselves to me in faith, shall not die forever.”

Like Martha, most of us trust in the resurrection or at least are hoping to trust. We are ready to hear Jesus say, “I am resurrection.” It is Mary’s experience that readies us to hear the rest of what Jesus said: “I am life.” “I am the resurrection *and the life*” even now, even here. Mary, after kneeling at the feet that she herself prepared for burial, said the same trusting words that her sister said: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” But this time, Jesus sees his dear friend weeping and her friends also in tears. And he is upset—troubled more deeply and more humanly than our reading might suggest.

The version we heard this morning renders the Greek as “he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” This is a feeble translation of the Greek verbs, too weak to capture the emotional wounding of an unexpected death. The first Greek verb implies more than simply a great disturbance and is more of an outraged passion. I think my own responses to this kind of death are captured in the more poetic rendering of the Greek as Jesus “lamented in thunders to the spirit.” The root of the Greek verb rendered as “deeply moved” carries implications of an interior stirring up, mentally, emotionally and even physically as in stirring up the calmness of still water.

These feel more like the kind of grief that has stirred up the minds and hearts and bodies of many of us in this parish over the past months. A very human kind of grief. And then, in the shortest verse in Christian scripture, Jesus weeps. Jesus has the same reaction that we have when we mourn. Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, wept real tears and wept them out loud with a broken heart, because death grieves God.

And yet there in the sting and the stink and the darkness of the tomb, God is always present. There in the dark, God offers us an experience of new life, life that has been forever changed. Life not ended by death, but life interrupted and open for renewal. There in the dark, God reveals unique and profoundly poignant

experiences of divine love for those who are ready to walk out of the darkness in response to God's loving call.

This potential gift of divine life offered in the heart of darkness was well-known to our ancestors in the Anglican way of being Christian in the world. The feast of All Saints is our gift to the world that comes from our earliest Celtic roots, the same inspiration for the large Celtic cross on the outside of this church.

Before the arrival of Christianity in the second century, November 1st was a New Year's Day of sorts in the Celtic world. Situated halfway between the equinox and the solstice, it marked the end of the harvest season and the beginning of the dark season. For pagans of Ireland and Scotland, the arrival of the dark season was a thin place. That is to say that the barrier between the physical realm and the spiritual realm became more permeable. People who had died, both friendly and unfriendly, could more easily cross the boundary to those still alive when the dark season came.

Consequently, on the night before the new season, pagans across Britain put on masks or costumes to disguise themselves from the unsavory characters that might now have access to them in this thin time. Those who loved them, and who would know who they were regardless of the costume, were invited to attend feasts.

With the arrival of the Roman Empire and Christianity, the young church in the British Isles began to recognize this season as a time to reflect on the communion of saints. Recognizing a rich truth from their earlier experience that could be enhanced and embraced from the perspective of the Gospel, the early Anglican church developed a theology that explained why it was possible, in this dark season, to see more clearly into the fullness of the kingdom of God.

Consequently, the early Celtic Christians would have been less distracted than we may be by the emergence of a dead man through the thin place of a tomb opened at the command of the Son of God. This was the Word that was in the beginning, the Word that was with God, and the Word that was God—Christ, in whom what came into being was life, the light of all people. Christ, the light that still shines in the darkness that will never overcome it.

A strange, perhaps counterintuitive reality, is it not? Strange, but in my experience true, time and time again that so often we see God's presence in the darkest of places. Facing the sting of death or sometimes the stink of death in our lives—these are the times when we can seek and find uniquely personal truth in the lines we read in Wisdom and Revelation. The lines that promise that no matter how dark it gets, and sometimes especially in the dark, the light and the life shine. That is why we start the Easter Vigil at night, not in the light of morning. Jesus rose in the uncertainty of the dark, not in the light of day.

We also celebrate the feast of All Saints in the lived recognition that in the middle of the stinking darkest times of our lives, if we look for the light and the life we will find it. And if we are having trouble finding it, we can ask for and expect the guidance of the saints all around us in the thinnest of spots because they can see the light. We enter into the thin spot of All Saints with the anticipation of Advent and the coming of the light in the Word made flesh; the Christ-child.

Until then, we are invited to see ourselves in Lazarus, whose name means "God helps." To see ourselves in Lazarus, who was from a town called Bethany, which means "House of Affliction." God helps those of us who find ourselves, like Lazarus, in a place of suffering. Lazarus, the "one whom Jesus loves," stands for everyone whom Jesus loves. That's you and me and all humankind. In the fullness of God's time, we will be reunited with the cloud of witnesses in a new way. The story of Lazarus is our invitation to come to new life in the midst of death in right here, right now.

Listen, then, for the Son of God saying "Come out!" to us. Listen for the Word that calls forth all creation saying "let there be life" into whatever darkness and pain we may be experiencing. The water of baptism has made it possible for us to be unbound from death so that, even as we grieve, we can joyfully participate in God's on-going work of renewing and restoring the world.