

Death Stinks
John 11:32–44
Sunday, October 31, 2021 (All Saints' Sunday)

I am really excited today, because for the first time in 11 years, Halloween is on a Sunday. First time since I've been the pastor here. Halloween has always been my favorite celebration of the year (I won't call it a *holiday*, because it's not quite that, but my favorite *celebration* of the year). I always loved dressing up, and then you go around and people give you free candy! What could be better than that? I would get to run around the neighborhood at night with my friends, filling up pillowcases with candy that would last me for *months*. I have always loved scary movies and haunted houses. Growing up in Florida, the weather was finally starting to cool off by Halloween, so it finally felt crisp and cool, like there was just something *different* in the air.

And there was always that part of Halloween that was just scary enough to be exhilarating. I can remember the house down the street from us that would have flashing lights in the windows that looked like lightning. They would be blaring recordings of scary noises – people screaming, things like that. The dad would always be dressed up in some really over the top scary costume, handing out candy at the door. It was always that house that you *wanted* to go up to, but there was a part of you that was too *scared* to go up to. It was exhilarating. It was like, for one night, the line between life and death, the living and the dead, *disappeared*, and maybe some of the things in those scary movies I loved actually *could* happen...

Now, Halloween is by no means a Christian holy day. But it's *roots* are found in something that I think we can relate to. There are different ideas on how Halloween first started, but as best as anyone can figure, the origins date back 2,000 years to the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain. The Celts, who lived in Ireland, the United Kingdom, and northern France, celebrated November 1 as the end of the summer and the harvest and the beginning of the dark, cold winter, a time that

was associated with death. They believed that on the night *before* winter began, the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead became blurred. The ghosts of the dead would return to earth and cause all sorts of trouble and damage crops.

The Celtic religious leaders, or Druids, believed that these spirits helped them to make predictions about the coming winter, particularly how much food they would need to sustain the people until the next harvest. So they had a big celebration with bonfires and sacrifices, and they would wear costumes and attempt to tell each other's fortunes. And at the end of the night, they would each carry a torch lit from the big bonfire back to their own houses to help protect them from evil and death in the coming winter.

By the 9th century, as Christianity had spread to those Celtic areas, Pope Gregory IV designated November 1 as All Saints' Day, a time to honor those who had lived and died in the faith. The church *coopted* a pagan celebration; took this thing that they were already familiar with and tried to make it a little more *Christian*. It was still celebrated in much the same way, with big bonfires, parades, and dressing up in costumes, but the people would dress up as saints or angels in order to *scare off* the evil spirits who were attempting to come into their world and do them harm.¹ As the years have gone on, the idea of dressing up has changed so that many children started dressing up *as* evil spirits and monsters and the dead, going door to door asking for treats as a way of appeasing or keeping the evil spirits happy. You know, "Trick or treat. Appease us or something *bad* will happen to you."

While the celebration of Halloween and All Saints' Day has changed over the years, there is one common theme that runs through the centuries. It reflects our *fear of death*. That there is this

¹ <http://www.history.com/minisites/halloween/viewPage?pageId=713>
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halloween>

force out there that we cannot control, and what is beyond it is unknown, and we need to do *something* to exert whatever little control we *can* over the power of death. So if you ask me, it's really fitting that on this day when the lines between life and death, the living and the dead are blurred, our lectionary reading for the day is a *zombie story*. I'm making light of it, but isn't that what this is? Jesus bringing Lazarus, who was *dead*, back to *life*. The dead rising from their tombs? Isn't that like every scary movie that will be on TV tonight? If Halloween *reflects* our fear of death, then how does *this* story *speak* to that?

This is a *long* story – it takes up 44 verses in chapter 11 – and the lectionary only has us looking at the *end* of the story, when everything comes to a climax. It's like only watching the *end* of a scary movie; you miss all the good stuff that comes *before* that. Mary and Martha live in the town of Bethany with their brother, Jesus' friend, Lazarus. And Lazarus becomes ill. We don't know *why* or *with what*, but he is sick. A message is sent to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." Jesus replies by saying, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." And Jesus doesn't go. He had just *left* that area because the people there were trying to kill him. So he went over to the other side of the Jordan River, and he stays there for two more days after hearing about Lazarus.

After a few days, he says to his disciples, "Let's go to Bethany, because our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." And it says that he was speaking about his death. So they go to Bethany, and when Jesus arrives there, he finds out that Lazarus has already been dead and buried for *four days*. His sister Martha says to Jesus, "Lord, *if you had been here*, my brother would not have died." Jesus says, "Your brother will rise again." Martha says, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day with all the other dead." And

Jesus says to her, “*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.”

So they take Jesus to the tomb, and when he gets there, he sees Mary and Martha and all these other people crying, and it says that Jesus “was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” Most biblical scholars agree that those descriptions – “greatly disturbed in spirit” and “deeply moved” – they sound compassionate, but they are actually too soft. The Greek words actually mean that Jesus was *angry* and *stirred up inside* to the point of being *anxious* or *sick*. So Jesus was *angry*, he was *anxious*, and then, it says, he began to weep.

That’s really interesting, if you think about it. *Why* was Jesus *angry*, and *why* did he *weep*? He *knew* that he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead. That’s what he went there to do. He said it several times. “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory.” “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going to awaken him.” “Your brother will rise again.” “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.” He *knows* that he is going to bring Lazarus back to life. He is the *one person* who has the ability to *do something* about this situation. *Why* doesn’t he just show up and *do it*? *Why* waste any more time? *Why* is Jesus *angry*, and *why* does he *cry*?

Biblical scholars have all sorts of *theories* as to *why*. Some say he is angry at *death*. Some say he is angry at the lack of faith of those around the tomb who are mourning; that they are focusing only on the things of *this* world and *this* life rather than in Jesus’ power to heal and make life possible. Some say that Jesus is angry at *himself* for waiting too long and not *being there* when Lazarus died. That’s really interesting, and we’ll come back to that one in just a little bit.

Some say that this is a reflection of the two natures of Christ; that Jesus is both fully *human* and fully *divine*. Jesus is both God and human at the same time. The *divine* nature of Christ transcends time and guarantees the ultimate restoration of all things (that one day all things will be healed and made whole again), but the *human* nature of Christ dwells in time with us and shares our sorrows. The one who walks on water also sits weary by the well of Sychar. The one who says, “I am the water of life,” also says, “I thirst.” The one who says, “I am the resurrection and the life,” also weeps over Lazarus. Christ is eternal *and* Christ dwells here with us. And we need *both* of those. We need a God who can be with us and share our tears, and we *also* need a God who can do something about it.

So there are all these theories, but the truth is, we don’t know why. We don’t know why Jesus was angry. We don’t know why he cried. And we don’t always know why *we* are. When faced with the painful reality of death, we can find ourselves feeling a lot of different things. And they don’t always make sense to us. “Why am I angry at my spouse for dying before me? It wasn’t their fault. I don’t know, but I *am*.” “Why do I feel so sad when this song comes on the radio?” “Why do I feel guilty about still being alive?” “Why am I crying over this person who I *didn’t even know?!?*” “Why am I *happy?* Shouldn’t I be *sad?* Is it *wrong* for me to laugh and be happy?”

When faced with death – with *loss* of any kind – we can feel any number of different emotions, from anger, sadness, guilt, despair, and fear to joy and relief. They don’t always make sense to us, and we don’t always know why we are feeling them. Maybe the only thing we *can* know is that Christ feels them, too. That we have a God who is not unmoved by the pain of loss or immune to the things that we feel. In that brief moment before Lazarus is raised from the dead

and brought back to life, Jesus weeps. And when *we* lose people that we love, in the agonizing space of time between death and resurrection, Jesus weeps with *us*.

But the story doesn't end there. Because after Jesus weeps, he tells them to take away the stone that covers the entrance to the tomb. Martha says, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days." Again, the translation softens the Greek up a bit. What Martha literally said was, "Lord, it stinks." Martha and Mary and Jesus knew what *we* know – that death stinks. That it's *hard* and *sad* and *painful* and *awful* and *unfair*. We talk about death being a natural part of life, but death is actually the most *unnatural* part of life. God did not create human beings to die. God created us to *live*, but we live in a broken world that does not work the way God created it to work. And one day God will set right all that which is wrong, creation will be restored to its intended glory, and we will live forever with God. But until then, we live with the reality of death. And death stinks. Maybe *that's* why Jesus was angry and cried – because *death just stinks*. It hurts to lose people.

And over the past two years, we have had to face the stink and the sting of death in ways that most of us have never had to before. Over 600,000 dead in a pandemic is almost more than we can understand. But we can understand the people that *we* have lost. This story started off with Jesus *not being there* when Lazarus died. It makes me think about the ways that *we* have not been able to be there with the people *we* love when *they* died.

I think about Lois Glaser in the hospital alone after contracting Covid and having a stroke. It was at the height of Covid, and no one could be there with her. I had to pray with her over the phone before she died. That experience really affected me and has stayed with me for the past nine months. A lot of us have experienced moments like that over the past two years; not being

able to *be there* with the people we love when they died, whether from Covid or anything else. Not being able to go to funeral services. Not being able to say goodbye. There's no better way to say it – it stinks.

But again, that's not the end of the story. Because after they roll away the stone, Jesus looks up to the heavens and prays to God and then calls out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" And, it says, the dead man came out, still wrapped in his burial cloths. And Jesus said, "Unbind him and let him go." This is the seventh and ultimate *sign* that Jesus performs in John's gospel. John doesn't refer to them as *miracles*, but as *signs*. A *sign* is something that points you to something *else*. And *this* sign points us to *Jesus'* own death and resurrection, to *our* resurrections from the dead, and to a time when God will heal creation and restore all things to their intended glory.

This story points us to Christ's ultimate victory over the powers of death. That there will come a time when death is no more, as the book of Revelation says, mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away, and God has made all things new. This story, and the story of Christ's own resurrection, assures us that death is not the end. Death no longer holds the last word in our lives. There is a life beyond what we can see and know. A life lived forever in the presence of God. That we have not seen those we love for the last time, for since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, *through Jesus* God will bring with him those who have died.

That does not *erase* the sting or stink of death. It does not erase our pain and sadness or anything else that we feel. But it gives us *hope*. Hope that Jesus knows the names of your departed loved ones – that Jesus knows *our* names – and he will call us all by name and recall us to life as surely as he recalled Lazarus to Martha and Mary. But in the meantime, Jesus weeps with us at the

graves of our loved ones and shares our tears. The one who is the resurrection and the life *also* knows the sorrows of death. We live in a world that Jesus has wept over; a world baptized by the tears of Christ. And it is into that world that Jesus calls out our names and sets us free from the bonds of death.

That is what this day, All Saints' Day, is meant to remind us of. Not the power of *death*, but the power of *Christ* to bring about *life* in the *midst* of death. And if you *believe* that, you will see the glory of God.