

**Sermon preached by Tom Haynes  
at St. Elizabeth's, Culver  
November 1, 2009  
All Saints Day – Year B**

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9  
Psalm 24  
Revelation 21:1-6a  
John 11:32-44

*“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be an acceptable offering in your sight, Oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”*

Yesterday I attended a beautiful funeral at St. Paul's in Mishawaka. Last week Mr. Broome, a teacher of mine in the 70's, was buried in Columbia, SC. A student emailed me Friday morning to tell me that her grandfather had died the night before, and that she might be a little distracted in class. In today's Gospel reading Jesus hears of the death of Lazarus, and the Scripture tells us that “When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.”

Now there is a temptation to tell people who have suffered a loss that we know exactly how they feel. The fact is that relationships are complex. Just because someone has lost a father does not mean that I will know how they feel just because my father died as well. I think that someone who has suffered a loss of this sort has a better chance of appreciating the issues though. We get to see a very human side of Jesus as he grieves with Mary and Martha. The Gospel tells us that “Jesus began to weep.” None of us know exactly what Jesus was feeling here, but we have all experienced moments like this.

I would like to point out that if anyone believed in the resurrection, it was Jesus. Jesus believed in the resurrection, and He cried in response to the death of his friend Lazarus. This suggests that it is not “unchristian” to grieve. If Jesus did it, it is not a sign that we lack faith or anything. It is tough to lose someone we love, and here we are on All Saints' Day remembering the saints of the Church. We also remember those who were saints to us. We remember those we love who have died. With those memories there is necessarily sorrow. I am sorry Mr. Broome died. Tori is grieving the death of her grandfather. One of the points in the Scripture is that this grief is OK.

The fact is that sometimes we are overcome with grief, and the grief eventually turns to sorrow. The hope of the resurrection can help us with this process. We understand and believe that we will be resurrected in perfected bodies. My mother died in 1995, and I miss her, but I have every confidence that I will see her again. This is a comfort to me. My loss is not permanent, and my mother is not gone forever.

The reading from Revelation talks about a new heaven and new earth. We are not the only ones who are redeemed. Our world is perfected as well, and we get a glimpse of it from time to time. C.S. Lewis writes in the Last Battle about Aslan's Country which is exactly like our world only

perfect. This is what we have to look forward to, and it is a source of hope as well. All things will be made new.

Jesus said in the Gospel of John just before today's reading that "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." We know people will continue to die. Jesus knows it too. Our prayer book has the beautiful words "In the midst of life we are in death" in the liturgy for Christian burial. The thing is that we will continue to find death in the midst of life. We will also find life in the midst of death. Those who die will live again. This is Christian teaching and it is why that the funeral service is an Easter liturgy. We are celebrating the resurrection even if it may not seem like it at the time.

I would like us to look for a moment at what Mary says to Jesus at the beginning of today's reading. Mary says "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." I think this is such a common response that we don't even notice it there. How many people hold up evil in the world as evidence that Jesus is not present? Something bad happens and they decide to quit going to church.

How could the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center have taken place if Jesus lives and loves us? This is really what Mary and Martha are asking. They assume Jesus was absent from the situation. We know that Jesus is present to us in the form of the Holy Spirit. We know because we have read the backstory that Jesus was aware of what was happening in Bethany and waited two days before he left. Jesus was on top of things, and he had a plan with Lazarus. It was not that he didn't care or was too busy to be involved.

God is not distant and reserved. God is close. He cares for us. He can grieve with us because he knows what it is like to lose a loved one. This morning's Scripture tells us that the time is coming when God will wipe away every tear from our eyes and when even death itself will be defeated. We know this, and we hear it read in church, and we believe it is true. Not everyone believes it though. Some people see tragedy in the world or have some event in their lives that convinces them not to believe.

So people ask, "Where is God?" And the answer is "with us." God was there when the towers fell on September 11. God was there during the tsunami in 2004 while so many of us watched TV from the safety of our living rooms the day after Christmas. God is there the tragedies large and small. We may not understand how, but God is there. God is there in the midst of suffering. He is there with those in pain. I will remind you that Jesus learned about suffering and loss first hand. He can relate as they say

So Jesus knows what it feels like to experience the death of a loved one. Jesus calls "Lazarus, come out!" I think Jesus is calling out to Mary and Martha too. He is calling out to each of us. Grief is real, but we can't be stuck in the grave. We have to come out of grief at some point, and Jesus gives us hope. We have hope in the resurrection. We have faith that all things will be made new. We believe that we will see loved ones again.

So I read this Gospel, and I see Jesus telling Mary, Martha and each of us to come out of the grave. It is not just Lazarus, although he was told as well. Jesus calls each of us to put away the fear of death. It is OK to grieve, but we can't let grief overwhelm us. We can't get stuck.

Jesus said, "Unbind him and let him go" to Mary and Martha, and is he saying the same thing to you and me. Maybe "stuck" is not the best image here. Having our hands tied may work better for us, and Jesus provides us with a powerful image.

Through Jesus we are not stuck, and our hands are not tied. He gives us hope.

I told you the theme of resurrection is key to understanding All Saints' Day. We will rise with the saints in glory.

Alleluia!

*I have said these words in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen*