

The story of Mary and Martha is the story of all of us, as there is no one on walking this earth that hasn't experienced the loss of a loved one. In Mary and Martha's case, their brother, Lazarus, has died. A large funeral was held at the church. The pastor gave a moving sermon. The organist played, "How Great Thou Art." The Deacons hosted a beautiful reception in the church parlor. Everyone hugged Mary and Martha and shared stories about Lazarus. The reception ended. Soon all the relatives left town, and Mary and Martha were alone with their grief.

Their good friend, Jesus, had missed the funeral. But a few days later, he knocked on their door. Mary answered it, embraced him, but remarked, with a tone of bitterness and regret, "If you had been here, my brother would still be with us in the present, not relegated to the past." In Jesus' absence, Death creeps in, claiming lives, stirring grief.

There was a television show on a few years ago called, "Pushing Daisies," in which a young man had the peculiar power to raise people from the dead with a single touch. Could you imagine such a power? Wouldn't it be a miracle? We all have a long list of people, even family pets, we long to revive with a brief moment of contact. But the man soon discovers his power is also a curse. It turns out that raising people from the dead defies the laws of nature. For every life he restores, another life is taken away. Thus the universe keeps its natural order and balance. If this man with the magical ability decides to revive another human being, he has to bear in mind that to do so bears consequences for another.

In a similar way, today's gospel reading places Jesus with an agonizing decision to make. As Fred Craddock points out, Jesus' reaction to the death of his dear friend Lazarus is not unlike the agony Jesus will soon encounter in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus knows he has the power to raise the dead. Jesus also knows that raising Lazarus to life will mean Jesus will soon forfeit his own. In Craddock's words:

"Jesus knows that calling Lazarus out of the tomb means that he must enter it. The narrative will shortly make that fact abundantly clear: the belief in Jesus generated by his raising Lazarus prompts the religious leaders to plot Jesus' death (vv. 45-53). But for Jesus there is no other way because only in this act can he be the resurrection and the life for the world. And so the reader sees in and through the Lazarus story the Jesus story. Notice: Jesus is troubled and weeping; the tomb is not far from Jerusalem; the tomb is a cave with a large stone covering the opening; the stone is rolled away; Jesus cries with a loud voice; the grave cloth is left at the tomb. Sound familiar?

The raising of Lazarus is Jesus' final sign (miracle) in John's Gospel and is the impetus for Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. Jesus cannot simply raise one man to life without the universe demanding to return to the natural order. Lazarus lives; therefore, Jesus shall die. But the resurrection is moment when the so-called-natural order is shattered; God raises Jesus from the dead, defying the laws of life and death that have governed the cosmos. If this sounds a little Easter-Sunday, you'd be right, but All Saints Sunday and Easter Sunday are two sides of the same coin. Whereas Easter Sunday celebrates the resurrection of Jesus, All Saints Sunday celebrates the lives of those who now enjoy fully unity with God. We anticipate that day when we are all joined together with saints past, present, and future, and weep with Martha, Mary, and Jesus that death has claimed those we love.

When I was a pastoral intern, my supervising pastor and I carpooled out to a cemetery for a committal. The person who had died was a long time member of the church and the pastor himself had been there for many years. "That's the thing about being a pastor--I've buried a lot of friends." Through my years as pastor, I, too have buried a lot of friends--dozens. This year we lost 15 of our dear friends here at Trinity. I've shared with many of you that planning and officiating funerals is one of the most sacred privileges of my job. One reason is that it grants me an opportunity to preach resurrection as a present reality, in addition to a future

event. Even at the grave we boldly make our song, Alleluia!, because of the words and actions of Jesus. Jesus, the resurrection and the life, not just someday, but this very moment.

As one commentary points out, “This is what All Saints Day is for: not just to remember those from long ago or those whose deaths are still painfully near, and not just to point ahead to that ultimate promise of resurrection, though both of these are certainly part of this day and to be affirmed. More centrally, however, this day is about what all God’s saints have known and experienced, that here and now there is no death or grief or fear so deep and dark that the voice of Jesus cannot reach into it, call us out, and bring life.¹

In Jesus Christ, there is no past tense or future tense: there is only the present. Death is not an ending; nor is it a delay--death is necessary in order for us to achieve full union with God. Even where there is an obstacle between us and God that seems as big as a stone, Jesus rolls away that stone for, in order that we might inherit abundant, eternal life. Even in times when we are afraid of what we might find in the tomb, Jesus walks us through the fear and even the stink of death. And it just so happens that when Jesus is with us in the tomb, we will find, not our future, but the present hope of eternal life. Amen.

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