

All Saints Sunday  
3 November 2024

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Pastor Chris

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Last Tuesday, we gathered to celebrate and say goodbye to our brother Kenny Berdoll. As I started to preach, I began with the words of Jesus from the book of John: “Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.” They are words of promise for broken hearts. Words we all need to hear at one time or another. Every funeral, every memorial service, every graveside goodbye could hear those words. The promise that our grief will not last forever.

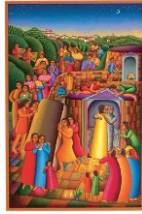
A story was written some years ago about the days after Lazarus was raised from the dead. It tells the story of Lazarus but the plot focuses on what happens to Lazarus in the years after Jesus called him back to life after four days in the tomb. In the story Lazarus comes out of his grave laughing...not a scornful, bitter kind of laughter, but a soft, tender, all-embracing sort of sound that seems to well up from a joy that is utterly bottomless. There is a radiance emanating from him that makes him look younger than when he died. There is a peace about his being that is absolutely tangible. As soon as Lazarus gets home and emotions have calmed down a bit, his sisters ask him: What is it like beyond the grave? Lazarus says, “there is only life. There is only laughter...the laughter of God soaring into the heights and the depths. There is no death really. Death is not the end, it’s not an abyss or the entrance into nothingness or chaos or punishment. Death is a portal, a passageway into deeper and brighter life. Eternal change, everlasting growth...that is what lies ahead. There is only life sisters, nothing but life. The grave is not what you think it is. It is literally empty...a doorway, not destruction.” As the play unfolds Lazarus goes on to live a life in which he is freed from the fear of death.

When we hear the story today, Martha has already questioned the late arrival of Jesus, and Mary is about to accuse Jesus of not caring enough to come sooner. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Mary and Martha only wanted just a moment with their Savior as their brother was dying. Some words of peace or at the farthest hope a miracle. We look for them, especially, in the lowest valley of our pain. Come on God—just one little miracle. A blink of your eye can change everything. Just will it to be done and it will be. From the grave you are able to call us back to life. That is all we want God – can’t you hear me? Do you not care? It is not so much to ask. You called Adam from the dust of the earth and Eve from Adam’s rib. Look, God this one is already put together. There isn’t any work here. Just open his eyes, breathe life back into his lungs, and let his heart beat with the rhythm of your power—with the life that gushes from your open hand. And yet there is nothing.

Even, we who follow, who call ourselves, the People of God, are challenged by doubt in the promise we hear Jesus speak to Martha – “I am the resurrection and the life.” Eternal life begins not at the end of time, or at the time of death, but right now in this moment. Jesus did not say, "I will be the resurrection." He said, "I am the resurrection." Here and now. Jesus brings the joy of life into our days. And yet, I know even as we carry that life with us into our week—we will be weighed down with the troubles of our worries, the tears of friends, the pain of the life we live not exactly being the life we want, expect, or feel we can change. And what do we hear from Jesus this day—I am the resurrection. We know death. We feel pain and can be drenched in darkness. That is what it is at times to be human. We deal with the loss of loved ones and the pain of dreams unrealized. We deal with disappointment and disaster as if they are old friends who visit too often. We believe in the power of the resurrection, but we live with the tangibility of disappointment – and that keeps the promise of resurrection at arm’s length. Even as we need to feel the promise of the resurrection deep in our bones.

I played a game a couple of weeks ago. An icebreaker of sorts. We never got past the first question. “What is the one memory you will never let go?”

I know that in this room there are countless other stories that have brought us to our knees and forced us to surrender everything we are to the God who calls us by name. There are stories that can only find peace in the hands of our God. This day, God’s hands hold both the promise and the pain we know in this life and in this life since we know both so well – this day reminds us that we live in the now and the not yet. One foot in this kingdom and one



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foot in the next. How these words give me hope this day... We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

We live with the limitations of pain and death, which can overwhelm us at times. We look for just a little bit of light to shine on our broken hearts and offer us some peace in the midst of the storms—calm in the midst of the chaos. That’s all we want at times. Just a breather—a moment to gather ourselves up and step forward before we are hit in the face by the next struggle in our lives. That’s all Mary and Martha wanted. In the midst of their pain, they wanted their Savior, they wanted Jesus. They can see only darkness. Their tears and their lamenting are seen and heard by the other villagers. Their emotion is as dense as the smell of death that will not go away. It is a time of incredible grief. These are the times that tell us of the power of darkness. Times of darkness so overwhelming that we can see nothing. A darkness that confines and closes and shields all light from our vision. It is this darkness that so overwhelms, that we cannot move or work or love or laugh or live. It is into this darkness that God rushes in. Rushes in and reaches us with open hands and lifts out – no, tears us from the grip of that darkness and pain to show us a better way.

When they arrive at the tomb, there is a stone sealing the entrance. Jesus tells them, “take away the stone.” And Martha, says to Jesus, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” Jesus says to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. And then they heard the words they would remember for the rest of their lives, “Lazarus, come out!” And into the light of day the first bandaged foot carefully steps. It is a miracle! Not just a healing, not a blind man seeing, or a deaf man hearing – no, this miracle astounds even the greatest of skeptics gathered. Lazarus, dead four days, stands living and breathing at the door of his tomb. Jesus commands the people, concerning Lazarus, “Unbind him and let him go.” With only words only God can speak. Resurrection happens. But it is more than just a resurrection. With the raising of Lazarus, Jesus offers us an opportunity to see what the future—what the Kingdom of God come into the world will be like. We have never seen such power as we see in the raising of Lazarus. God breaks into the world and we are the ones who receive sight after being blind for so long. No longer does the darkness hold shadow and fear. Jesus calls us out of the darkness.

As Christians we already know the end of the story. We have heard the cries of resurrection. “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! And yet, we know death still comes. We know that there will be pain. We know that there will be darkness. We know what death tastes and feels like. The salty flavor of tears. The dry parched mouth. The lump in our throat that won’t go away. We know death. And death touches us in many names. Mom, dad, sister, brother, husband, wife, friend. The darkness of death may overwhelm but it does not have the power to consume. Yes we stand in the darkness, under the shadow of the cross, but today, on this All Saints Day, we see a vision, a ray of light into our pain by way of Jesus and his stop at Bethany and the emptiness of his own grave.

When Jesus asks his servants to take away the stone that rests in front of your grave and you hear your name called by your Savior, will you be ready? Are we ready to have our stone rolled away? Whether we are or not...Jesus is! Today, with the raising of Lazarus, our eyes are opened to the possibilities of our future with God. Today we find Jesus taking away the first stone and calling out one who was dead - back to life. Today Jesus calls your name and invites us to find favor in his sight. Today Jesus looks into our darkness and with the simple words of his voice calls us out of our own self-made tombs. From the grip of darkness and the sting of death, Jesus calls and we cannot help but follow the sound of his voice. When the stone rolls and the light shines – the words of the prophet Isaiah will be ours to claim, “This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice.” And we will know why Lazarus laughed. There is only life. There is only life. “Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.” Thanks be to God! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.