

“THE HOPE OF ALL THE SAINTS”

by The Rev. Victor Kim

John 11:32-44

(11-07-21) Remembrance/All Saints

If you had been here, my brother would not have died. These are Mary's words, but they are exactly the same as her sister Martha's. The two sisters, as different as they might have been on many other things, are united in their conviction about this. **If Jesus had been there, if only Jesus had been there, their brother Lazarus would not have died.** Jesus would have healed him, cured him, kept him from death. And it's worse than it seems because if Jesus would have been there, even just one day earlier, even after Lazarus had died, **if only Jesus would have been there within the three day period** that Jews believed that the spirit tried to return to the body after death, it would have been okay. **But Jesus wasn't there, he wasn't there until the fourth day, until it was too late. If only...if only Jesus had been there.**

There's so much regret in these words. **Maybe you're familiar with words like these.** If...if only...if only I had said no, or said yes, or taken the risk, or stayed away, or moved when I should have, or stayed put. If only I had paid more attention, if only I had studied just a bit more, if only I had the courage to ask, if, if, if only... **And it seems that as we get older, as life passes on, our regrets threaten to turn into despair.** As we get older, we know that there just isn't the time to repair the regrets, and with the knowledge that time is slipping by our regrets can turn more and more into despair. Eric Erikson, the developmental psychologist says that there are 8 stages of psycho-social development throughout a healthy life which manifests itself in a series of crises and questions. In early life, up to age 4, those questions are about trust and autonomy. **Can I trust the world, is it okay to be me?** Who knew toddlers were asking such profound questions? Erikson says that teenagers struggle with questions of identity and role, **who I am, who can I be?** Young adults seek to discover **whether they can love**, while those in their 40's and 50's ask the question of **how can I make my life count**, struggling between generativity and stagnation. According to Erikson, the last stage of development takes place after we reach the age of 65 and the operative question at this stage of life is, **is it okay to have been me?** Erikson says that at this stage of development, we, for the first time in our lives, look back over the path **and there comes to us, as we look, either a deep sense of integrity, meaning and wholeness, or there will be a opposing sense of profound despair.** Waste, mistake, unresolved relationships, guilt, shame and blame these are the ingredients for us to despair.

There comes a time when we believe it's just too late, that what's done is done. Timing is everything. That's why the sisters of Lazarus sent word to Jesus that their brother was sick. **But Jesus waited.** He wasn't in any hurry and he lingered for a couple of days where he was before he began to journey to Bethany. By the time he arrived, Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days, it was too late. If you had been here, my brother would not have died. **The despair is palpable.** Earlier in the story, when Jesus first arrives at Bethany, he's met by Martha. Remember Martha from another story with Jesus? She's the one doing all the work because Jesus comes to visit, complaining to Jesus that her sister Mary won't help her. She's the pragmatist. She says to Jesus, Lord, if you'd been here, my brother would not have died, but she adds more. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him. Jesus replies, your brother will rise again. Martha says to Jesus, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. **More pragmatic words could not be spoken. Martha understands how the world works. When you die, you die.** Even Jesus' words that her brother will rise again have to be confined to how she understands the world to work. Resurrection is for the last day, for the next life. **She believes absolutely that Lazarus will rise again, but in the last day, in the next life.**

But that's not what Jesus is talking about. They took him to the tomb where Lazarus was laid. And there Jesus wept. He wept for his friend, but one also gets the sense that he wept at the lack of understanding and faith displayed by those closest to him. Take away the stone, he said. Martha protested, but Lord, he's been dead four days, it stinks in there! Jesus said to Martha, did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God? When the stone was removed, Jesus prayed to God, Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me. Then he cried out in a loud voice, Lazarus, come out. **And out came the dead man! Jesus said to them, unbind him and let him go.**

What do you do with a God who resurrects on the fourth day? When it's too late, after everyone had given up, Jesus calls out Lazarus from the tomb. **When's it too late for you? What's too late for you? What are the tombs that have sealed us in, from which we are convinced that there can be no renewal? Where in life do we live with deep regret, live with the resignation of despair, the acknowledgement that it's just too late? And what do we do with the gospel that declares that if we believe, we will see the glory of God?**

I suppose for many of us it might be easier, safer, to stick to the script. The fourth day is too late. You can't resurrect a dead relationship. You can't rekindle an extinguished hope, you can't change the integrity of a life lived when it's just too late, when there's just no time. We want Jesus to mourn with us, to cry with us, to comfort us, **but I'm not sure we want Jesus to call out the dead from their tombs.** I mean imagine the chaos, all the trouble that would arise if we truly believed that the gospel had the power to do what it says, that if we believe, we will see the glory of God. Imagine how disoriented our lives would be, how unbalanced our expectations would be if we allowed for a God who resurrects on the fourth day.

All those decisions we have already made, all those post mortems we have already given, they might have to be reconsidered. All those plans, neatly laid to rest, would have to be reassessed. Sometimes it's easier to let the dead stay dead.

But on this All Saints day, when we remember the saints, those who have gone to God already, but also those of us who are still among the living, **don't you wonder what Jesus would want for us, for you?** Don't you wonder about a Jesus who resurrects Lazarus on the fourth day? Don't you wonder about a Jesus who lingers where he is because he knows that what he will do is for God's glory, so that the Son of God maybe glorified through it? **Doesn't it make you wonder, just a bit, that maybe Jesus wants to resurrect something dead in our lives, so that God might be glorified through it?**

We can be pragmatists like Martha, believing in good faith that there is an order to all things, **that sometimes it's just too late, that we have to live with regret.** Or we can trust in the one who is the hope of all the saints, our hope. We can believe in the God who raises Lazarus on the fourth day, when it's supposed to be too late, when all human convention tells us that there's no point. When all human convention tells us that after a certain point in your life's journey, you only get to choose between knowing that you've lived a life of integrity or being consigned to a life of regret, for whatever life you've got left, **the hope of all the saints, even those of us older than 65, is that with God it's never too late. If it's not too late for Lazarus, dead as a doornail, dead for four days, if it's not too late for the dead, how could it ever be too late for those of us who are still living?**

If you believe, you will see the glory of God, says Jesus to Martha, **and those words teach us that the opposite of despair is faith.** Faith is the hope that it's never too late, that the only regret we should ever truly have is

not having sought to trust and believe in God. Does it mean that faith will bring back those who have died before us or change the trajectory of the diagnosis or magically undo all that's been done? Not necessarily. **But faith and hope in God means that we trust in the God whose love will not let us go. It means to acknowledge that healing doesn't always mean cure, that resurrection happens in many forms.**

It means that the ingredients for despair, waste, mistake, unresolved relationships, guilt, shame and blame, can be addressed honestly and with integrity, at any age, at any stage of life. It means that we can seek out forgiveness or seek to grant it to someone else, that we can be released from the guilt, shame and blame that shackles us because we know that we have a Saviour who has freed us and lifted the weight of our sins from us. **It means that in the grace we have in a God who loves us enough to die for us, we can be freed to address those unresolved relationships with a vulnerability that comes from those whose identities are secure as children of a gracious God.**

Maybe the final stage of our development isn't the choice between integrity or despair. **Maybe it's the choice between despair and faith, between resignation and hope, between a premature dying and a believing that the God who raises the dead on the fourth day can surely do something with the living, no matter how late the days may seem to be.**

The word saint comes from the Greek that means **holy one**, and from the Hebrew that means **set apart**. In our baptisms, we have been set apart, we have been made holy, made saints by God's grace. As saints in our Lord Jesus Christ, we no longer need to be terrified of death, **but more importantly, we no longer need to be terrified of life**, for God is with us and God is for us, wanting to use us for God's glory.

The stone is rolled away and we can hear the voice of the one calling us to life, to leave whatever tombs we have sealed ourselves in, to be unbound and to live as a resurrected people. The voice of Jesus, the hope of all the saints, calls to us. **Come out, come out, it's not too late, it's never too late.**

And to God be the glory, now and forevermore, Amen.