

Sermon for November 5, 2017
All Saints Sunday
"Time To Dust Off Those Saints"

John 11:32-44

Lazarus was dead! Mary and Martha were devastated. We are not sure of the details of their lives. Had Mary and Martha been married and now widowed with no children? Were they young or old and as yet unmarried? Through one course of events or the other they were living in their brother's house.

Lazarus had been the man of the family in a day when the authorities listened only to male voices. But more importantly this was their brother. Their lives had been woven together since birth. They had taken care of and cared for each other all their lives. And now he was dead.

Lazarus was dead. The tax collector would mark off his name. The census taker would make him a statistic. But Mary and Martha would weep.

We enter the story this morning when Jesus arrived four days after the fact. After talking to Martha, Mary comes on the scene. She kneels before Jesus and says, "If only you had been here my brother would be alive." Now some see these as callous words spoken in anger. As if she were chastising Jesus for being late. But maybe they are a confession of her faith that Jesus could have done something instead of an accusation that he failed to do what he could.

When Jesus saw her weeping and those with her he was moved. The New Revised Standard says, "When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." The way it is translated it sounds as if Jesus is having compassion for them. The original Greek however conveys the idea that Jesus is angered and irritated. Jesus is upset with the way they are acting.

So what is Jesus angry about? Perhaps Jesus next words give us a clue. Immediately after the Bible tells us that he is angered by them it tells us that he asks, "Where have you laid him?" I can almost hear Jesus saying it with a note of disgust.

It appears that Jesus is upset with their failure to believe in his power to make the dead alive. They could believe that he could heal the blind. They believed that he could have healed Lazarus before he died. But at death their belief stopped, so they took Lazarus off and buried him. If they had really believed that Jesus is the resurrection, they would have left Lazarus in his bed until Jesus came. Then Jesus wouldn't have had to ask where they had laid him.

Today is the Sunday after All Saints day. It is the day on the Christian calendar when Christians have traditionally remembered the lives of God's saints. It used to be a time when Christians would recall and recount how these saints had lived and died. They would tell and retell the stories and thank God for these witnesses. You know the Greek word for "witness" is "*marturion*" (μαρτυριον) from which we get the word martyr. Those martyrs bore witness through their deaths that Jesus was the resurrection and that he had power not only to heal the living but to raise the dead.

One of my favorite martyrs and saints is Polycarp. Polycarp was a Christian Bishop who lived in the second century just 100 years after Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. The Romans

were persecuting the Christians because they would not worship Caesar. A number of Christians were fed to lions or otherwise killed during this persecution. So the Bishop, Polycarp, went into hiding because the Romans were looking for him.

When they finally caught up with Polycarp, who was in his 80's, they told him that considering his great age he should just say "Lord Caesar" and that would be enough. When he wouldn't do that they demanded that he curse Christ. To that Polycarp replied, "Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me?" They threatened to feed him to the lions or burn him alive. To this he replied, "The fire you threaten burns but an hour and is quenched after a little; for you do not know the fire of the coming judgment and the everlasting punishment that is laid up for the impious."

Those are the kinds of witnesses to Jesus, the resurrection that Christians used to share on this day. But we don't seem to do that now a days. In the Protestant church we seem to have placed the saints on a shelf where they have grown dusty. The history behind this is well known. During the Reformation, Saints were taken out of the religious lives of the people because of the few cases of abuses. I still hear people who spread the Reformation propaganda that Roman Catholics "worship" the saints. Certainly at times and places the veneration of saints has gotten in the way of glorifying God, but in the right context remembering their lives, and deaths, glorifies God.

I understand why the Protestant Reformation put the saints up on a shelf, but I feel it is time to dust those saints off. There is a hymn in our hymnal that says "a world without saints forgets how to praise." You know we live in difficult times just as those saints did. And often times we feel threatened or discouraged by the troubles we face. And so we pray to Jesus to come and deliver us and encourage us and give us faith.

I can almost hear Jesus responding. Where are the saints I gave you? Where are the martyrs and witnesses I gave to inspire and encourage you? Where are the stories of lives lived in faith that I gave to strengthen your faith? And Jesus knows we will respond, "They are in a book gathering dust on a shelf in the church library."

Jesus is the one who can and will raise the dead. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. And the stories of the martyrs and saints are the stories that show us faith in that truth being lived out. Whether it is St. Frances who sold all he had and gave it to the poor, or St. Patrick who was a 4th and 5th century Billy Graham who spread the gospel in Ireland, or Detrick Bonhoeffer who stood up to Nazis in Germany and died in concentration camp, or Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who strove for freedom of body and soul, or Mother Teresa who gave her entire life for those who were least likely pay her back. All these lived lives that demonstrated a faith in the resurrection power of God alive in Jesus.

So let us tell these stories of faith. Let us recall John and Charles Wesley's struggle to spread the faith. Let us remember how Luther and Calvin led the reformation that created the Protestant churches. And while we are at it let us recall those saints in our lives that have demonstrated the faith for us. Like those who we remember and honor today with these candles and the memorial banner, who have taken their place in the church triumphant in glory.

Then inspired by their examples, we can live our lives for Christ. We can give our lives even unto death. For like the saints, we too believe that Jesus is greater even than death itself.