

# Unbound and Set Free as Saints of God

John 11: 32-44, Nov. 1, 2009

Today is the beginning of the end of the church year. At the end of this month, Advent begins and we move again through the cycle of birth, death and resurrection that has shaped the church for thousands of years. Today we honor and remember those who have died in the faith since the last Nov. 1<sup>st</sup> but as we approach the end of the church year, we will hear warnings about the end of time, stories of crisis and judgment, and parables of loss and death. We will not shy away from the reality of human frailty and human powerlessness in the face of death.

But at the same time, we will confess faith in the risen Lord, which is the power of God to create life over and above our very real experience of death. In the words of Luther Seminary professor Dr. Craig Koester (yes it is spelled the same) "Death is real, but it is not final". We recognize both of these truths on *All Saints Sunday*.

Death is indeed real. The loss of our loved ones is painful and senseless. There is no explaining it away as "God's will" or rationalizing it as part of some master plan. The grief we feel from losing daughters and sons, mothers and fathers, siblings and companions is a powerful reminder that death is still our enemy. In the face of this unexplainable loss, our gut reaction echoes Mary's lament. "Why Lord? Why did this have to happen? Surely if you would have been here, my loved one would not have died!" To us God seems absent from the scene or at the very least, gets there too late. It doesn't make sense.

And it's not just physical death that we grieve either. We experience the 'associates of death' when we are betrayed, abused, and enslaved to destructive behaviors. We suffer economic and mental despair. Divisions between us isolate and separate. Broken relationships suck the life right out of us. We are *entombed* just as surely as Lazarus was – *held captive* by things out of our control and so *wrapped up* that we can see no way out. I have experienced this in my own life and when a group of us spent two weeks in Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina, I encountered many of death's associates in the stories people told. Some of you here today are experiencing some kind of death in your own lives right now. We cannot escape the wages of sin in this world.

Lazarus' body carried death's stench. His sisters, Mary and Martha, believed Jesus could have prevented all this **but now it seemed too late**. Their tears were real ... but then so were the tears of Jesus. A Christian musician named "Eli", wrote a song called "God Weeps Too". Death is not God's intention. Our pain and our suffering is felt by God in ways we can't begin to understand. We can accuse God of not being there when it counts. We can wonder if it isn't too late, even for God. But the cross of Jesus shouts the truth that God knows our pain. God enters into our death.

Yet as real as death is, the empty tomb shouts that death is not and will never be – final! **It will never be too late for God to act**. The power of God that lives in us through faith is the power to overcome the finality of death and all of those destructive 'associates.' We have hope that all those saints who have died, will live in the presence of God -where mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

**And** - by the power of this same God- we have hope that we can be raised **right now** from the dead and decaying places that separate us from the joyful life God intends. Faith in Jesus is trusting that God will always have the last word. God will always find a way to create new possibilities from the tombs we find ourselves in. God is there grieving with us, but then, at the right time, calls us out for **a second chance at life**. Jesus commands the forces of death to “unbind us and let us go” and we have hope that life is possible even when the smell of death is all around.

How this new life happens for us is often less spectacular than coming out of a grave - but sometimes that is what it feels like. The guest on *Larry King Live* last night was Hulk Hogan. The story he tells is one of coming out of a tomb of despair and finding amazing new life. After the loss of many things in his life, he felt trapped. Like Samson, his great strength was useless and he was in a prison he saw no way out of. But then, through the words of a caring friend, who invited him to church, he felt a remarkable change. He felt a freedom and a power to start over in a new direction. It sounded like someone had called him out of the grave and said, “Unbind him and let him go.”

God is at work in the world in all kinds of unexpected places and through all kinds of ordinary people. **That is what makes people holy people, saintly people**. When a hurtful word is forgiven, there is a real sense that like Lazarus, someone is “unbound and let go”. When we let down our protective walls, the stone that blocks the way to new life is removed and relationship recover. When help is offered to strangers, when enemies are loved and the hurting are healed - there is a real sense that a tomb has been opened and rays of sunshine drive the darkness of despair far away.

God is the power behind all of this new life but we have the unbelievable privilege of being a part of the process. God calls you and me to be the bearers of light and life in this world. God gives us the power to walk out of our own tombs and to roll the stone away from the tombs of others. Perhaps it is as simple as giving a few dollars so that a child in Tanzania can have a textbook. Perhaps it is admitting our failures and frailties to those we have hurt. Perhaps it is knitting a shawl, serving a funeral lunch, making a quilt, or assembling a school kit. Perhaps it is setting aside some time to go on a mission trip to offer hope to someone who feels trapped and alone and afraid.

When our group went to Biloxi Mississippi three months after hurricane Katrina, we were unprepared for the devastation that we saw. And we didn't even get in on the worst of it. Before we arrived, volunteers had “mucked out” houses by removing rotting materials and shoveling out up to a foot of smelly, slimy mud. Animals and humans alike had died in that stench and that smell represented death's cold, hard reality. But as each bucketful was carried out, **it was the beginning of the end to people's hopelessness and sorrow**. I worked with a little crew of inexperienced seminary students who by some miraculous power, managed to put up 70 sheets of drywall in a house. We taped it, sanded it, and primed it before we left. The owner was a single mother, who was trying to hold down her job while living with her children in a tiny little trailer parked in the driveway. When she walked into the house after we had finished, she could hardly believe her eyes. She looked as if a veil had been lifted from her face and she was experiencing life anew for the first time. “It finally feels like a home again”, she said. She called us “hurricane angels” but we were simply living out the holy calling of sainthood given to us by a Holy God who declares that **it is never too late because death will never have the final word**.