

**All Saints, Year B**  
**November 4, 2018**  
**The Rev. Dr. Dena Cleaver-Bartholomew**

Halloween is a major holiday in our culture. It is a nationwide opportunity to be playful, to pretend, for adults and children alike to allow their imaginations to be expressed in outward and visible ways. I find it delightful to see children and teenagers come to our door all dressed up, and to see how creative people can be with their costumes. Halloween is shorthand for All Hallows' Eve, the night before All Saints' Day. It has its roots in the holy day on which we remember All the Saints who have gone before us into the nearer Presence of God. If Halloween is the night on which we put on masks and costumes and pretend to be someone or something other than our true selves, then All Saints' Day and its companion All Souls Day are when we set the pretense aside and come before God with souls bared. All Saints and All Souls shift our focus to both the inward and spiritual aspect of our being, and to the very real challenge of learning to see differently. We come to this day to look both at and through the reality of death into eternal life.

The Gospel reading draws us right into the death of someone beloved by Jesus. Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, has died.

Each sister approaches Jesus with her grief, puzzled as to why Jesus did not come sooner, as they believe he could have saved Lazarus. Martha, who went out to meet Jesus even before he got into town, brushes off Jesus' assurance that Lazarus will rise again. It sounds much like the awkward and unhelpful platitudes people say when someone dies and they don't know what to say to their loved ones, like *He's in a better place now* or *It was her time* or *Everything happens for a reason*. But what Jesus is saying is no trite attempt at comfort. Instead, he is as straightforward with Martha as she is with him, saying, **"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"** And, if you can listen with the appropriate astonishment to Martha's reply, you will hear one of the most powerful confessions of faith in the Bible: **"Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."**

Jesus then met Mary, who knelt at his feet and wept, laying before him the belief that if he had come sooner Lazarus would not have died. Hanging in the air is the implicit question we all ask when something goes terribly wrong: *Why?* We hear that Jesus was deeply moved and

troubled, so much so that he also wept. It is one thing to know of human pain and grief. It is quite another to experience it. Jesus was both witnessing the profound pain and grief of Martha and Mary, and feeling his own. In addition, lest we forget where we are in the Gospel, Jesus was on the way to his own suffering and death, and he knew that if he were to do what he was about to do—raise Lazarus from the dead—that his action would hasten the momentum to his own death. So as we hear what Jesus does, we need to listen with the awareness that he knew he was next to die, to be laid in a tomb, to have others weep over him, to have the stone rolled away, and to be raised after three days. This was the preview of Jesus' own suffering, death, and resurrection. And knowing all that, he still walked to the grave, told the people to roll away the stone, and called Lazarus out of his grave.

What is easy to miss as we listen to this story is that Jesus calls us out of our graves just as surely as he called Lazarus out of his. Not only in the future, as Jesus clarified with Martha, but now. This story is not just about the Resurrection on the Last Day, though it is clearly an affirmation of that. It is also a story about coming to new life now, in the present moment. We are not literally dead, as Lazarus was, but we are all too often bound by our doubts, fears, circumstances, and human

limitations. To believe in Jesus now is to receive new life *now*, to be engaged in the process of ongoing transformation, to be shedding what binds and limits us, and to do so with the help of God and our faith community. We are called to participate in the freeing of one another from fear and doubt so that we can live into new life in Christ Jesus, just as when Jesus called Lazarus out of his tomb, he turned to the crowd and told *them* to **“Unbind him, and let him go.”** Lutheran Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber articulates our call to new life in the present when she says,

**The Christian faith, while wildly misrepresented in so much of American culture, is really about death and resurrection. It’s about how God continues to reach into the graves we dig for ourselves and pull us out, giving us new life, in ways both dramatic and small.**

On this day, as we celebrate All Saints and All Souls, we look at and beyond death to new life, both now and eternally. We gather around the altar, with the saints of God both before us and beside us, an unending testimony to the power of God at work in all of us through the Holy Spirit given to us in our baptism. We come to together in worship and praise so that we might continue to grow into new life, to be transformed by the unconditional love of Jesus Christ, to unbind one another, and to be among the countless saints through whom God works to change the world. Amen.