

A Spooky Sermon
Ezekiel 37:1–14, Matthew 27:45-54
A Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Woodbury UMC
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Even after a lifetime of reading the Bible and attending church, Scripture still retains the power to shock and amaze me. This message started off with two thoughts intersecting, the first of these being the deep strangeness of today's Gospel reading. Now, this is NOT today's lectionary text. Both of these texts, in fact, come in the lectionary as texts we commonly read just before Easter. But I wanted us to reflect on this text **today**, as we have an opportunity to examine these in an unusual setting.

Setting, or context, may seem like a small thing, but I have long noticed that a film is highly affected by the circumstances or setting in which you see it. I have seen movies at midnight, sitting in a theater with good friends, and found a given film to be really great and highly entertaining—and yet, if I were to see the very same film by myself at home on a Sunday afternoon, it would not have the same impact. Given the pandemic, many films have premiered in various streaming services, that had been intended to be seen on the biggest screen possible. A gigantic, awe inspiring spectacle that affects you emotionally just isn't the same when seen on your phone. Just yesterday I saw *Dune* on Imax, and seeing such a gigantic spectacle on a gigantic screen is a totally different experience from seeing it on your phone.

The first time I saw the original *Planet of the Apes* movie was at the San Diego Comic Con – the biggest convention of this type in the western hemisphere!—after midnight. Along these lines, I remember seeing George Romero's classic zombie movie *Dawn of the Dead* when I was 16, in a screening room while I was attending my very first science fiction, comic book and horror convention. In *Dawn of the Dead*, the humans have retreated to a shopping mall. When the zombies break in, and the screen is filled with images of the mindless dead wandering through a shopping mall, always consuming but never satisfied—it isn't a stretch to understand that the filmmaker **might** be making some sort of social commentary. Zombies are clearly fraught with meaning and subtext.

So setting matters. I note that we are on the cusp of Halloween, when all things spooky and creepy are found everywhere, and our thoughts turn to the eerie and the macabre. Of course, in Easter season, we decorate with pastels, baby chicks, colorful eggs, and bunnies. And yet, these two scripture passages, generally read at the height of the Lenten season, tell us of something that seems more of a Halloween theme. We have long-dead bones reassembling before our eyes, creeping flesh slowly enveloping the bones, sinews snaking slowly over the bodies, and finally skin crawling across them until they are covered entirely, leaving behind a valley of ancient bodies. Seriously Creepy, right?

And perhaps the most starting thing of all: The very ground shakes and cracks open, splitting open the tombs and revealing the bodily remains of many people—and then, the dead are “raised,” leaving their tombs and “appearing to many” in the city. Some of you may take this as symbolic, some may take it as literal—but no matter how you understand this passage of Matthew's Gospel, it is **very strange** and more than a little frightening. What does it mean for us, today?

Now, I told you that this message started off with two intersecting thoughts—one of them being these strange texts and a desire to see how they speak to us at this time of year, in this fall, spooky context. When I first thought to do this, I became excited, and so I shared my thinking with a close friend, who

looked at me skeptically, and asked “Are you sure you aren’t going to upset your congregation by talking about Halloween in church?”

I must admit, he had a point. I know that some Christians are very uncomfortable with Halloween, seeing it as perhaps coming too near to glorifying principalities or dark forces, or putting our faith in the supernatural. To compound things, in recent years, we have a regrettable trend of highly sexualized Halloween costumes, which seems to be unhealthy at best. New for 2021, you can get costumes including sexy Covid vaccine, and sexy space astronaut billionaire! So I get it. And so here we are.

But if you look at the history of Halloween, it has gone through quite a lot of transformation, blending of traditions, and overlaying of meaning, such that simply fixing on one ancient component and ignoring the rest does not give a complete picture. Many have noted the similarity of Halloween to the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain, when people would light bonfires and wear costumes to ward off roaming ghosts. Celts believed that on that night, October 31, the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead became blurred and it was believed that the ghosts of the dead returned to earth. Later, once the Roman Empire had conquered Celtic territory, they combined Samhain with two of their own festivals, starting with Feralia, a day in late October when the Romans traditionally commemorated the passing of the dead. The second was a day to honor Pomona, the Roman goddess of fruit and trees—whose symbol is the apple—and probably explains the tradition of “bobbing” for apples. A few centuries later, an early Pope established the Catholic feast of All Martyrs Day, which a later Pope then expanded to also include *all* of the saints, intentionally putting it right by Samhain. By the 9th century All Saints Day gradually blended with and replaced the older Celtic festival. The All Saints Day celebration was also called All-Hallows—and the night before it, began to be called All-hallows Eve and, eventually, Halloween.

Halloween migrated to the United States, and during colonial times any celebration of Halloween was initially extremely limited because of rigid Protestant beliefs. In the late 1800s, there was a movement in the United States to mold Halloween into something more about community and neighborly get-togethers, and parents were encouraged to take anything “frightening” or “creepy” out of Halloween celebrations. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Halloween in the United States had lost most of its superstitious and religious overtones.

So—Why the history lesson? Because what we have here is a blending of many traditions, ancient and otherwise. Certainly there are pagan roots here, but if you focus on them to the exclusion of all of the many, many secular traditions, harvest festivals, and community gatherings, you miss something significant, and you erase the many other ways people have understood Halloween over the years. This tradition that has gone through many, *many* permutations over the years. Many Christians have even understood it as laughing in the face of the Devil, reminding him that Jesus has already won the battle, and that he has lost his power. In fact, earlier this week on Facebook we posted an official church article regarding the UMC thoughts and opinions on Halloween, and if you are at all interested by that I urge you to check it out. (<https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-what-is-the-united-methodist-churchs-view-of-halloween>)

I am pretty confident that the ancient author of Matthew’s Gospel had none of this on his mind when he was writing. Instead, hearers of this story would have known Ezekiel’s vision of bones raised to life, seeing it as an Old Testament prophecy that was fulfilled in the raising of these saints. Evangelical pastor and theologian Chuck Swindoll suggests that the raising of the saints relates directly to the coming kingdom. The raising of a few—**but not all** of the saints—shows that Jesus has power to resurrect, but also points forward to the second coming and judgment of Jesus Christ, and ought to hasten our desire to

repent and trust in Jesus so we can share in his resurrection. Jesus has power—but the work **is not done yet**.

There is something else going on here. Look at Ezekiel's words once more—those who have been raised are the whole house of Israel, who had been cut off from their inheritance. And they came back to life, and made their case. I read these words, and I am reminded that the dead are still with us, and that the past is never quite as far in the past as we think, or as we may like.

I look at my sisters, and my nieces and nephews, and suddenly long-dead relatives are back in the room with me. I visit my parents, and spend the night in their home, and before I know it I am fifteen again. I see my parents get together with my aunts and uncles, I watch their interactions and hear their conversations, and the children that they once were, are in the room, plain as day.

I have a scary story for you.

Sometimes, when I am attempting to have a conversation with one of my children, I even hear my mother and father's voices coming out of MY mouth! The ghosts of the past are alive and well, whether we realize it or not.

The past continues to have much relevance in our current lives. How many of us have literally had our lives changed—literally changed!—because the words of someone long dead have touched our hearts, and come alive in our very being?

This is the time of year when our thoughts turn to a blend, both ancient and modern, of secular and sacred traditions. After all, Christmas and Easter are very important celebrations for Christians—and Christmas is celebrated on the same date as the ancient Roman holiday of Saturnalia, linked to mystery religions and the Nordic holiday of Yule (remember the Yule log?)

Easter is celebrated at the same time as the pagan festival of Eostre, a Germanic goddess whose symbol was a rabbit or hare. (Exchange of eggs is an ancient custom, celebrated by many cultures.)

Even more, both of these important days have become highly secularized in our modern culture. Most of what goes on around Christmas and Easter these days has nothing to do with the Good News of Jesus Christ. How do we reconcile these non-Christian, highly secular trapping around our most holy days? I think, ultimately, we discover our own meaning in it. For instance, I know of several United Methodist Congregations that have successful pumpkin sales—at one time including Woodbury UMC, right?—the United Methodist Church in Ridgefield CT sells two and a half tractor trailers full of pumpkins every year during the six weeks leading up to Halloween. I have helped unload those trailers and believe me, that is a LOT of pumpkins! It feels like an Amish barn raising. The whole community comes out to get the job done, and what a great day of laughter, community and sore arms it generates! This raises the profile of the church in town. It gets people onto the church grounds, many for the first time. It raises a lot of money for the Navajo farmers who grew the pumpkins. It builds a tremendous sense of community, and of shared ministry. The whole thing also serves to give a positive interaction, to offer a little hospitality to those who might have had no other experience with a church.

Others have developed different traditions. When I was a kid, lots of us would go trick or treating for UNICEF, collecting spare change to help children around the world. Did anyone here every do that, ever figuring out how to fold the cardboard into a little box with a handle to carry it around? I think that qualifies as a worthy ministry by whatever criteria you like.

Just as Halloween exists in a swirl of influences, we Christians are living in a culture that has learned to co-opt religion for its own purposes. You hear about this every Christmas, right, with charges of a War on Christmas? That by itself is a terrible attempt to weaponize people's feelings around Christmas for political gain. And yet, we persist. We make meaning. We take the traditions of our ancestors, and we

use them to inform and guide, as we go about the business of being the modern church. We have tried to take the best of our tradition and keep working with it, and are trying to stop doing things that hurt people and exclude people. We are no longer the church that we were hundreds of years ago, and thank God for that! For that matter, we are NOT the caricature of goody-goody Christians that is all too common in the public imagination, and Thank God for that! We Christians are at our best when we are a counter cultural people, resisting the tides of the prevailing culture in order to stand for something greater, something much bigger than ourselves.

The Apostle Paul said that he would become all things to all people, that by all means he might save some. John Wesley advised the early Methodists to “Do all the good you can. **By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can.** As long as ever you can.” Well, just a few weeks ago I was able to make meaningful connections with people over their love of their dog. Is it possible that some of those means might be spooky? Is it possible that some of those ways might be creepy? Is it possible that one of those times might be late in October, in the dark of night in front of the church, and that some of those people might be trick or treaters who don’t know much about the church other than that those of us out front were friendly and kind?

So let us do likewise. What remains is a time to recall our traditions, to build community, to have a little fun and some much-needed fellowship, and—if we are mindful—a chance to offer ministry in a broad range of settings. We are reminded that we are a link in a chain of ancestors and Christians that spans the ages, and of the ways that we can bring each other up in the faith. It is a time of remembering the saints of the church, and a potent reminder that the good-natured frights of Halloween wither to dust in the face of our Lord and Savior.

Our fears have been replaced by joy and blessed assurance, and Thank God for that!