

November 1, 2015

Tim Hughes

New Testament Reading: John 11:1-45

Sermon: “Recalled To Life”

Sometimes the lectionary is a little bit on the nose, I think.

Today, according to our liturgical calendar, is All Saints Day. It’s a day to claim the kind of promises that we usually reserve for funeral services. All Saints Day is a moment to hold up this central theological conviction of our faith, that those people that we love who have been separated from us by death – those people who we spent our days with and shared meals and inside jokes with – those people who we have *lost* - will be reunited with us in the deep and everlasting love of God.

That message is at the heart of All Saints Day.

Today is also, of course, the day after Halloween, and what better day for a story about a man who is somewhere between a mummy and zombie and a ghost?

So yes, I have to give the “Two Birds, One Stone” award to the lectionary for selecting the story of Lazarus for today. It couldn’t be more appropriate.

In our Protestant tradition, All Saints Day does not refer to particular, rarefied people who are especially holy. This is not about Mother Theresa, although she is certainly included. It refers, rather, to all the people who follow in Christ’s way, and *particularly* those who have passed from life through death and on into the mystery of life in God.

And of course, it is not a coincidence that All Saints Day and Halloween overlap. The word “Halloween” is an evolved form of “All Hallow’s Evening,” or the night before All Saints Day. While one day is designated to remember the promises of resurrection, the other has evolved into

this obsession with costumes, carnivals, candy, and death. We can see which one has captured the American imagination.

But no worries, friends, because the Lazarus story has it all.

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In his essay, "Air for Two Voices," Fred Buechner points out that there are two dueling voices in the first chapter of the Gospel of John.

He describes the first voice as a "chanting voice, a cantor's voice – ghostly, virginal, remote, and cool as stone." ¹

"In the beginning was the Word," the voice chants, "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God" (1:1-2). The voice is beautiful and theological and a little detached. That's the first voice.

The second voice, Buechner says, is this "insistent, over-earnest" voice. It's a very human voice – kind of like an over-caffeinated personal assistant that is trying hard to keep everything straight. "There was a man sent from God," the second voice says, "a man whose name was John. Now – he was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light."

Then the first voice glides back in: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth."

"John bore witness to him!" the second voice interrupts again. "John cried out, 'This was him! This is the one I was talking about!'"

As you read through the first chapter of John, you have to jump back and forth between the beautiful poetry and these angsty interruptions. It's a little bit jarring, but Buechner thinks that it's entirely appropriate. To him, the space between God's beautiful, transcendent reality and our angsty, human response – that space in-between is the church.

¹ Frederick Buechner, "Air For Two Voices," from *Secrets In The Dark*, Harper Collins, 2006, p. 115.

“When the host is being raised before the altar,” he says, “to the tinkling of bells, it is very...right if not his bounden duty for the sexton to walk through with the vacuum cleaner.” Crying babies and police sirens are not disruptions of the service, they are vital to the service. The New Testament itself is written that way: the risen Christ coming back at dawn to the Sea of Tiberias, Jesus with the mystery of life and death upon him, standing there on the beach saying, “Have you any fish?” ²

That’s the way the scriptures are written and I don’t think it’s an accident. It’s not about divinity to the exclusion of humanity but rather the tensions between divinity and humanity that make Jesus’ teachings so profound.

And where, really, are the tensions between divinity and humanity more profound than on the boundary line between life and death? It’s a place of great pain for those of us left behind, but it’s also a place where time and again people report experiences of the *holy*.

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Some fifteen years ago, I was awoken at 7am in my college dorm room by a ringing telephone. Being a college student, I was not used to getting called at that hour, and immediately my mother’s tone caused my stomach tighten up. She said, my grandparents had been driving to the hardware store when their car was hit by a truck that careened through the intersection. My grandfather, she said, was shaken and sore, but my grandmother, who I had given the name ‘Nino’ as a toddler, was unconscious and in critical condition. We may be heading to Kentucky, my mother said, before hanging up. I lay in the bed, numb, unable to think, unable to stop that pickup truck from veering in and out of my imagination.

A few days later, she died, without ever regaining consciousness. My father, Nino’s son, left for Kentucky so quickly after the accident that he forgot his dress shoes. When the rest of us arrived at that little Baptist church in Danville, I found him standing near the coffin, wearing a black suit and sneakers. I walked over to him with two shiny dress shoes and

² Buechner, p. 116.

no idea what to say. It was a terrible, terribly sad day, from the moment we arrived till the moment those first handfuls of soil and roses were scattered across the grave.

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That's how death often comes to us: unexpected and awful. Lazarus is dead. That's the bottom line. Whatever time was still left on the clock ticked away, second by second, and no matter how badly Mary and Martha wanted it, Jesus didn't arrive on time.

You can feel that angry edge in their voices as they finally greet Jesus. "If you had been here, my brother would not have died," Martha says. But she still can't help but add, almost sheepishly, "Even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask."

Jesus replies, "Your brother will rise again."

"Yes, yes," Martha says. "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." And she's invoking a commonly held belief from her culture that all faithful Jews would live again with God at the end of time. It was a comforting thought in a very remote way – kind of like imagining you'll be reincarnated as a rich person. A nice thought, but not particularly relevant to your current situation.

But Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, though they die, will live. And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

It's important to note that in the original Greek, Jesus is using an unexpected word for life. The Greek word, *bios*, means physical, biological life. But when Jesus says, "I am the life," he uses the word *zoe*, which implies an infinite, eternal, and more metaphysical meaning.³ This context helps make clear what Jesus means when he says, "Those who believe in me, though they die, will live. Though they die, their *zoe* will endure."

³ Trench's New Testament Synonyms: Life. www.studybible.info/trench/life

This is a lovely and powerful sentiment. It's one of the reasons why I named my dog Zoe, and it's one of the reasons it's such a common scripture reading at funerals.

But Buechner would be quick, I think, to label this as the first voice talking. Lyrical, lovely, and a little detached. "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, though they die, will live."

The second voice shows up shortly thereafter, in Jesus' explosive talk with Mary. And when the human voice appears, it comes out of Jesus' own mouth.

When Mary approaches Jesus, she says exactly the same thing as Martha. "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." But unlike Martha, she offers no fancy theological interpretation, no faithful hope. She just dissolves into weeping.

Jesus' response is to weep as well. "Where have they laid him?" he says through his sobbing. They lead him to the gravesite, a shivering, emotional mess. "See how he loved him!" the bystanders remark.

It's hard to reconcile this Jesus with the man who said, only days before to his disciples, "For your sake I am glad that I was *not* there, so that you might believe."

Over the centuries, people have tended to minimize the human voice of Jesus in favor of the divine one. Particularly *our* people, the Calvinists, can't abide by the idea that Jesus is shaken by Lazarus' death. They prefer to say that he was just being supportive of Mary's grief or that he was just disappointed by everyone's lack of faith. I don't buy it.

I'm more likely to side with the bystanders here – after all, they were there. See how Jesus loved Lazarus! It breaks his heart to realize that his friend, that familiar face, is gone, even if only for a while. It hurts him to see Mary and Martha suffer. This doesn't negate or tarnish the lovely first-voice promises of resurrection and life. It opens up a space between the divine and human, a resurrection space. If anything, it offers a way forward for us, the people who live in-between.

When the physical, biological resurrection occurs, it is certainly a show-stopper. When Lazarus finally re-appears, blinking and stinking in the daylight, it understandably astonishes the crowd and causes many of those gathered to believe in Jesus.

It was an incredible moment, an honest-to-God miracle. But one has to wonder how many years it would be before Lazarus died again? What was it like to be Lazarus 10, 20, or 30 years later, once again on his deathbed? What would have changed?

If anything, I'd wager it was this. In his living, and loving, and dying with Jesus, Lazarus learned that resurrection is a little more complicated than he once believed. It was not that he no longer believed in the powerful promises of God, the first-voice assurances of Jesus: "I am the resurrection and the life." But he had experienced in his own ordinary, extraordinary days that every mundane moment is shot through with life and death. Every day can bring resurrection, for those with eyes to see.

That kind of revelation changes the way a person lives.

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When I was in college I spent a semester in Italy with a family who spoke no English. When I arrived at their home my vocabulary was mostly pasta-based and not very useful. I was in language classes for two hours every day and trying desperately to communicate. But eventually we got to this place where I could put together sentences but only in the present tense. Future and past tense conjugations were too advanced.

"How was your day?" my Italian mom would ask.

"I am great," I would say. "I am in class." I knew it was wrong but couldn't fix it.

Someone might ask me, "How old were you when you got diabetes?"

"I am...nine?" I would say, feeling dumb.

I'll never forget the day I came to the dinner table and proudly announced, "I *went* to school today." The whole family clapped.

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I feel like there is a similar grammatical collision happening between Martha and Jesus. Martha, like almost all of us, talks about resurrection in the future tense. "Yes, she said, I know that he will rise again on the last day."

But Jesus' response is resolutely in the present. "I *am* the resurrection. I *am* the life."

It's remarkable to me that Jesus says a thing like that *before* his own death and resurrection. *Before* Lazarus emerges from the grave. I am the life. What are the implications of that?

It's as though he is saying to Martha – "You know you can taste it right now. You know I'm right here. It can start today."

I think, in the absence of the second-voice, this kind of talk would come off as naïve optimism. New age mumbo jumbo. The kind of talk that makes Bill Maher hate religion. That's why I think its so important to remember that Jesus is on the edge of weeping. Jesus understands fully the painful realities of death. Jesus is speaking words of hope from death's door because he knows that it is exactly where resurrection happens.

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The man who officiated my grandmother's funeral service all those years ago was a kind man named Tom who had known my grandparents for years, and he and the funeral director gathered my family into a parlor to pray before the service. To assist with the planning, he also invited the short, rosy-cheeked organist, a man by the name of Jerry. The funeral director started the meeting, saying, "First I want to extend our condolences to the Hughes family on this very sad day. Thanks for being here. Secondly, I want to thank Tom and Jerry, who have

prepared a beautiful service to celebrate Ann's life." The words "Tom and Jerry" caught me so by surprise that it was as though that little brown mouse and rascally grey cat had burst through a hole in the wall. I felt a little giggle in my belly. *Oh my God, not now*, I thought. I focused on the light green rug and tried desperately to feel sad.

"Now, the family has given us a list of some of Ann's favorite hymns, the ones we know she would have wanted played at the funeral," the director was saying. "Tom has put those hymns in the bulletin, and Jerry has prepared to play them." It was, I think, the thought of that little mouse playing the organ at my grandmother's funeral that pushed me over the edge, and I made a little snort. I looked up in embarrassment, only to see that my sister, brother were also on the verge of losing it. See it on their faces was too much, and we laughed out loud. It was so inappropriate. It confused my poor grandfather and annoying Tom and Jerry, who I think, after years of working together, were very much over it. But you know what? It was *worth* it. It might have felt trivial and embarrassing at the time, but years later, I can see that it was a healing, holy laughter. It was the day that Nino's body returned to the earth. And as much as we needed the exalted Scripture reading and the hymns - we needed the *laughter*. Why?

Because it was just a little reminder that while we wait with great hope, while we claim the promises of God, while we sit in pain, while we weep, resurrection starts now. New life starts now, in our hilariously human present moment.

So you know, here we are – somewhere between Halloween and All Saints Day. In a moment, we'll hear beautiful music and the names of the people we grieve so deeply. If we are lucky, the sexton will have the vacuum cleaner ready, the babies will cry out, someone will be looking for fish. It's our life. Embrace it, with all its light and dark, joy and pain. Because there is resurrection in our future. And there is resurrection right now.