



SERMONS THAT WORK

All Saints' Day Year B

The Surprise of the Resurrection

[RCL]: Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9 or Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 24; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

Winston Churchill, arguably one of the greatest political and military leaders of the 20th century, planned every detail of his funeral at St. Paul's Cathedral in London. He worked clandestinely with cathedral staff, under the code name "Operation-Hope-Not." (That code name reveals a lot about humanity's attitude toward death, doesn't it?) One aspect of his funeral seems absolutely inspired: a bugler played *The Last Post*, which is like the equivalent of *Taps* in the United States, from the west end of the cathedral. When the somber notes of that solo bugle echoed through the cathedral, I can imagine the stiff upper lips of many Brits quivered, as they were no longer able to hold back tears.

Then a full minute of silence passed.

And then, surely a surprise to all those mourners who crowded into St. Paul's that day, another bugler, this one positioned in the east, rose to play *Reveille*, the happy morning bugle call that gives soldiers and scouts the "get up and go" they need to kick-start their day. Perhaps after the tears, a few suppressed chuckles slipped out. Always a commanding presence – even from the dead – Churchill relayed two important messages.

First, he offered a testimony to the shock, joy, and surprise of the Resurrection. At the last day, we'll all rise to the sound of the Lord playing a heavenly version of *Reveille* and waking us up to the new life, new earth, new Jerusalem. It wasn't random that the *Reveille* came from the east, where the sun rises, the direction the altar faces in many churches, the direction from which we expect Christ to return again.

Secondly, Churchill bid them to press on, to attend to the day at hand, and the life ahead, here and now.

But let's go back in our imagination to that minute of silence because that is where we can locate this great feast day we've gathered to celebrate: All Saints' Day.

That minute of silence is where we find ourselves wondering:

- Is this really it?

- What comes next?
- Do we have enough tears to cry?
- Is there enough patience to persevere?

Somewhere in the uncomfortable silence, having heard *Taps* and waiting for *Reveille*.

Somewhere in the waiting, for God to descend among us and wipe every tear from our eyes.

Somewhere in the hoping, that Jesus' words are trustworthy and true.

Somewhere in the trusting, that God is preparing, for all peoples – my favorite saints and yours, those dearly departed in this community and abroad, folk we miss dearly and folk we never knew – that God is preparing a feast of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

Somewhere in the discomfiting silence, where we wait for God to swallow up death forever, even as it abides with us here and now.

And in this quiet and disquieting moment, when we wait, hope, trust on our best days and fight despair on our worst – that is the moment where we meet the Lord.

Today's liturgy, feast, and Gospel reading all encourage us to feel the grief and sorrow, maybe even impatience at having to wait that long minute before we hear *Reveille*, or anger at how death takes away, at least in physical form, the people we love. We are given the courage we need to wait for *Reveille* - together, nourished around this table, hearing God's story in our stories, and pleading, like Mary did, for Jesus to come and take death away.

Today's Gospel story is remarkable. In John's Gospel, the raising of Lazarus is the event that provokes the necessity of Jesus' death in the eyes of his day's elite. After Lazarus was raised, the religious and political leaders were focused on eliminating him. There was something so threatening in Jesus' disruption of the world on the world's terms. Jesus is distraught: weeping, disturbed, maybe even angry, and certainly grief-stricken. And yet Jesus is fully in-charge, not operating on our preferred timetable, but on his own with a larger purpose in mind, that of engendering trust or belief in the crowd that had gathered.

Mary articulates what many of us feel when someone close to us dies: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus doesn't directly respond to this. Instead, he begins to take charge, first finding out where the body is and then issuing a series of short commands:

Take away the stone.
Lazarus, come out!
Unbind him, and let him go.

What would it be like to prayerfully wonder how the Holy Spirit might be telling us in the words of Jesus:

“Take away the stone.” What stones in your life need to be removed so that Jesus can get to you? Ask for the grace to take away the stone.

“Lazarus, come out.” Jesus knows us each by name and calls us o’er the tumult. Even death can’t deafen our ear to Jesus’ call. “Lazarus, come out.”

“Unbind him, and let him go.” Sometimes each one of us needs help becoming free, loosing ourselves from the chains that bind us to death-dealing ways. To whom in your life can Jesus say, “Go, unbind your friend. The abundant life is available for him, for her, for you, here and now, even in your grief, even in your tears, even in your longing to be reunited with your beloved who is now part of that great cloud of witnesses.”

Each of these commands offers good material for our own prayer life. When we pray, just like when we receive the sacraments, we are closer to the saints because we are placing our hearts and minds in the nearer presence of God.

Jesus is very explicit about why he raised his friend Lazarus. He did this so that the crowd back then, and you and me today, might believe, might trust in the God who sent Jesus to raise Lazarus, in the Father who raised the Son on the third day, in the Lord who will swallow up death forever. This story inspires us in our waiting, in our hoping, in our trusting, in that long silence between *Taps* and *Reveille*.

And, maybe, just maybe, in heaven, the equivalent of *Reveille* goes like this:

Holy, Holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts...

And maybe, just maybe, every Sunday, we come back here to hear that tune, to wake up to it, maybe even to join in – with the angels, archangels and all the company of heaven – including those saints we remember and grieve and are grateful for and celebrate this day.

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts: Heaven and earth are full of thy Glory. Hosanna in the highest.

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