

## *REMEMBERING, WAITING & HOPING*

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preached at Valley Presbyterian Church  
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Revelation 21:1-6a

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

SECOND LESSON

John 11:32-44

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

When Winston Churchill died in 1965, his funeral service had already been planned down to the letter—by him. Turned out he'd been working on it in secret since 1953. He'd even given it a code name. He called it "Operation-Hope-Not."

The service was held at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, and as you can imagine it was beautifully done. But one part in particular was truly inspired. A bugler positioned at the west side of the cathedral stood and played *The Last Post*, which is basically the British equivalent of *Taps*. It's played at military funerals to honor soldiers who've died. And when those somber notes echoed through that cavernous space, I'm sure many a stiff upper lip began to quiver as people struggled to hold back their tears.

Then a full minute of silence passed, which is a long time. An uncomfortably long time. To sit there with nothing but your thoughts. To sit there feeling the loss and sadness of an entire nation. To sit there contemplating your own inescapable mortality. It must have seemed like an eternity.

Finally another bugler, this one positioned at the east side of the cathedral, stood and played *Reveille*—the trumpet call used to wake up soldiers at dawn and get them out of bed so they can report for duty. When those bright, sharp notes shattered the silence, I'm sure people smiled, and maybe a few even laughed. Even in death, Churchill was giving orders and telling people what to do: *Don't sit there weeping. Hope remains. Life continues. Keep pressing on.*

As gifted a politician as Churchill was, I think he missed his true calling as a pastor. Because in that funeral service he spent twelve years planning, he ministered to everyone in that place, and he gave them two important gifts. First, he helped them confront the fact that eventually we all go down to the grave, which is an awareness most of us spend our lifetimes avoiding, even though in many ways it's what gives our lives meaning and purpose. Second, he reassured them that death is not the end by letting them feel the sudden shock and surprise of the Resurrection. It's no accident the *Reveille* came from the east—the direction of the sunrise, and the direction from which, according to tradition, Christ will return some day.

But let's go back to that moment of silence between the bugle calls, that moment when everyone in that cathedral was suspended between the reality of death and the promise of new life. Because that's what All Saints' is about. All Saints' is a little pause, a little heartbeat, when we're sitting here remembering and waiting and hoping. Remembering friends and loved ones who've died in the faith. Waiting for God to wipe every tear from our eyes. And hoping the words of scripture are trustworthy and true—that God is making all things new, and that one day death will be no more, even as we continue to live in its shadow.

This is a hard place to be. But what I love about All Saints' is the fact that we don't experience this little pause by ourselves. We go through it together, as a community.

And not just the community that's gathered right now in this room, but the community of saints, the great cloud of witnesses, all the believers who've come and gone before us. Their faith encourages us, just like we encourage one another. Their wisdom helps us grow, just like we help each other grow. We lean on them for comfort and support, just like we lean on each other.

I honestly can't imagine, not just All Saints', but Christian life in general without community. We'd never get from the first bugle call to the second. We'd always be stuck in the moment between, feeling that tension. We'd always be sitting here remembering and waiting and hoping, but never going any further, never being jolted out of our gloom by the reality of resurrection.

Put simply, Christian life is a journey that's not meant to be taken alone. It's a journey that's meant to be taken together—as we see in the story of Lazarus. This isn't a story about one person dying and being raised. It's a story about a whole community dying and being raised. This isn't a story about one person walking out of a tomb into the light. It's a story about a whole community walking out of a tomb into the light.

The story opens with Jesus arriving in Bethany too late to save his friend, Lazarus. Lazarus' sister, Mary, comes out to meet him at the edge of town, and when she sees him, she falls down in front of him, weeping. "Lord," she says, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died." And she's not alone. She has a bunch of people with her—friends and neighbors—and they're all weeping, too. The whole town is grieving together. The whole community is living in the shadow of death.

Then Jesus asks where the body is, and Mary leads everyone to the tomb. When they get there, Jesus tells them to remove the stone from the entrance, but Lazarus' other sister, Martha, warns him about the stench. The body has been in there a while. Jesus responds by telling her if she believes, she won't smell a decomposing corpse. She'll see the glory of God. And hearing that, people go ahead and open the tomb—the people from the town, the friends and neighbors. Together they roll the stone away.

Then Jesus looks upward and says, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." He's doing this, not only to bring Lazarus back from the dead, but to show everyone the life-giving power of God at work in him.

When he finishes praying, Jesus cries in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" With a shout, he wakes Lazarus up, not unlike a bugler playing *Reveille*. He gets Lazarus out of bed so he can report for duty—so he get back to living his life. Then Lazarus comes stumbling out of the darkness, with everyone standing around watching.

And you know how when someone dies, you think about that fact that the sun is going to come up tomorrow, and they're not going to see it, the world is going to go on, and they're not going to be part of it? Well, the people in that graveyard are witnessing just the opposite. Not hoping for it, but actually seeing it. "The sun went down on Lazarus' last day," they're thinking, "and here he is with the light of a new day shining on him. We said our goodbyes and moved on, and here he is, part of our town again. This shouldn't be happening, but it is happening."

Together they're feeling what the people at Churchill's funeral felt: the shock and surprise of resurrection—life appearing where life has no business appearing. Hope springing up where two seconds ago there was only despair. But before they can run up and throw their arms around Lazarus, there's one thing left to do.

Lazarus is still wrapped in burial cloths, and he can't get out of them by himself. He needs help. So Jesus orders, not just whoever's closest, but everyone there, the whole assembly, to unbind him together—which is such a beautiful image of what Christian community is about, and what All Saints' is about in particular.

When one person is wrapped in fear, or sorrow, or hurt, or anger, or shame, or anything else that's keeping them from walking freely into whatever new possibility God is opening up, the rest of the community unbinds them—by remembering, and waiting, and hoping with them, until the *Reveille* comes, and a new day dawns, and everyone welcomes it together. Amen.