

Sermon on John 11:32-44
All Saints Sunday, November 1, 2009
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Okay, let's get on with it. One of the greatest challenges any human being faces is how to deal with death. People deal with death in many different ways. A lot of people fear death, and many choose to deny it (or choose not to deal with it) because of their fear. Most people deal with the death of loved ones, friends and neighbors with tears or grief, but some don't feel anything – they just don't care (like some soldiers or those who have been surrounded by too much death). People of faith may deal with death differently than those without faith...or they may not. How do *you* deal with death – that of others whom you know, or face your own? That is what this day is all about, and this question is addressed directly in the gospel today. On this Feast of All Saints we are invited to remember the lives of those we know and love who have died, and to face death of loved ones and ourselves with faith and hope in the promises of God. Can we do it? With God's help, with faith, and with the guidance of the scriptures, yes, we can!

The gospel from John begins with a story about Jesus, whose friend Lazarus became deathly ill while Jesus was away on a journey, preaching and teaching. When Jesus was told of his friend's illness, he chose not to rush back, but rather to remain where he was, to complete his work. Only then did he begin his journey back to Bethany. On the way, the message came to Jesus that Lazarus had died. Upon hearing this news, Jesus wept. When Jesus arrived at Lazarus's home, his friend's sister met him, and said "if you had only been here, my brother would not have died." Wow...quite an accusation – or perhaps just a statement of fact by Lazarus's grieving sister. How many human beings have been seen as having the power to have prevented a death by their presence? We are allowed to wonder for what reason had Jesus delayed his return. Did he not care enough about Lazarus – only his work? People asked, how could this man who gave sight to a blind man not keep his own friend from dying? Good question.

Then, when Jesus saw the grief of Lazarus's sister Mary, and those who mourned with her, he was "deeply moved". He went to Lazarus's tomb where the body had been buried for four days – yes, Lazarus was most certainly dead. Even so, Jesus told them to roll away the stone, and open the tomb. They did as he asked, and then Jesus prayed, thanked God, and called for Lazarus to "come out." And the dead man came out. Wrapped in strips of cloth, as was their custom, so Jesus said, "Unbind him and let him go." Lazarus was now free from the bonds of death, ready to live once again. Could there be any greater miracle than this? Only one – when Jesus himself was raised again from the dead soon after on Easter.

So what had Jesus done here, beside do the unthinkable, the unimaginable – *raise a dead man to life?* Jesus gave a new alternative to all humankind for how to deal with death – not only as the final enemy, as the end of life, as a fate to be merely accepted or utterly avoided, but as an event that can be faced with faith and hope because it is NOT the end, but the beginning of a new existence. In raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus showed that death is not just the end, but also can be the beginning of a new life. By setting Lazarus free from the graveclothes that bound him, Jesus showed how the power of God can unbind you and me from everything and anything that binds us all today, even the bonds of sin and death! That is the real meaning of this story today! It's not just an old Bible story about Lazarus, Mary and Martha long ago...From this experience of God's power in Christ Jesus, we have an example that gives us hope in God's power in our own lives, which can even overcome our fear of death. And set us free to live.

For you and I know that there is plenty of fear of death these days in our world. You can see it in the concern about war and violence, and in the fear of illness or H1N1 viruses and the lack of health insurance coverage or adequate healthcare in our own community and nation. Yes, the fear of sickness and violence and death is real. We see the pictures of grief-stricken Pakistanis and Afghans rushing the wounded to hospitals, and burying their dead, after terrorists set off bombs in marketplaces and attack hotels. We see the lines of worried parents bringing children to have their flu shots, and feel the shock when children or adults die suddenly from illnesses that don't seem that serious. Yes, there is plenty of pain, fear, sorrow and grief from disease and death these days, as always.

I recall the tears that I have known from persons I have loved who have died. There is an old saying that "men don't cry" – but I can tell you from experience, that this is not true. I have cried, and have seen many men cry, at the loss of loved ones from death. Sometimes I am just doing my job, helping others deal with the death of loved ones (whom I don't know), so I don't feel their pain. But when I know the person who has died, I do. And I know the tears that flow from having someone I know and love who has died. We all do, for we are all human beings here. So we gather today in worship together for our annual remembrance of all our loved ones who have died this past year, to light candles and remember all the saints who have died in the Lord. For some of you the pain and loss is recent, for loved ones lost these past 12 months, and the tears may still come easily. To you I say this: Jesus knows your pain, for he, too, lost a beloved friend, and wept. The good news today is that you and I have a God who understands, who knows the pain of losing a loved one – even a beloved Son. You do not weep alone.

But there's more good news as well. Today we hear in the holy scriptures a new vision of the life that is to come, where death is not the end, and a new life is promised by our Heavenly Father. In the second lesson from Revelation we have

John's vision of a new heaven and a new earth, when the home of God is with God's people, and God himself dwells with us. He tells of a time "when God will wipe every tear from [our] eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things [will] have passed away." This is a great promise, that give us hope through faith in the God who raised Jesus to life, who promises to raise us also after we die, and invites us to share a table with him at the Great Banquet which is to come! When our pain and tears are turned into joyful laughter at the great reunion with those we love, in the eternal presence of God.

This is why we gather today as the Church. Because sometimes we suffer our pain and tears alone, grieving for our personal losses of family or friends. But today we join together to remember those whom we have loved together, to hear the names of loved ones read, to light candles to remember their baptism in the Lord and their eternal presence with us, and to pray for one another as we move on with our lives. Then to remember the promise that God has made in Christ, to raise us all to life, in communion with all those who have died in the Lord.

And here's one more word of good news. God also gives us promises for our lives today. Just as Lazarus was unbound from the graveclothes that bound him in death, God promises to free us from those things that bind us in life today. Many of you may feel trapped or "bound up" in prison by your limitations, or circumstances in life. Some of you have a physical limitation that keeps you from walking or speaking freely as you once did. You may have suffered an illness that keeps you from enjoying life, from hearing or seeing what you once could hear or see. Emotional or physical abuse may have left you wounded, afraid to speak or to feel. And we all are in bondage to sin, unable to free ourselves. But with the power of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, we are set all free as we place our trust and hope in the God who promises each of us life everlasting! How do we know? Because God has raised Jesus from the dead, and has promised to raise us up as well – not only after we die, but today, through faith, when we reach out to him!

So, how can you and I deal with death today, as people of faith? By not merely avoiding death and its pain, hoping to forestall it. And not just by mourning our lost loved ones, or fearing our own inevitable death. But by remembering the love and the joy that our lost loved ones have brought to us, by remembering the promises that God has made to raise us and our loved ones to live once more, and by realizing the power that our God has to not only create this world and life itself, but to resurrect those who have died, and give the power and joy of living to you and me and all who believe! This is why we have come today, and this is the message of good news that our Lord shares with us. For "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end," says the Lord, "and Behold, I am making all things news." That's what we can call truly an "extreme makeover" in the Lord! Thanks be to God! Amen.