

All Saints Sunday 2015
John 11:32-44
“Halfway to Easter”
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, Saint Paul
Bishop Patricia Lull

Grace and peace to you from God the Father, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

I greet you on behalf of the 112 congregations and mission starts that make up the Saint Paul Area Synod. We stretch from Chisago County in the north to Dakota County in the south with Washington and Ramsey Counties in the center. Close to the heart of that is Lutheran Church of the Redeemer.

Thank you for being part of a church that extends well beyond these walls at the corner of Dale and Carroll. Through your mission support dollars you are invested in our synod’s work in Tanzania and Guatemala, in supporting Luther Seminary and Lutheran Campus Ministry. You help fund the ELCA’s work in global mission, hunger relief and in offering assistance **today** to refugees and migrants, who are fleeing wars in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. You support the work of Lutheran Social Services and ISAIAH and are agents of God’s work at Benjamin E. Mays and Hallie Q. Brown and with the witness of the healing garden in your side yard. You are well known as a congregation that cares about the well being of the city. Thank you. Thank you.

Somewhere between birth and death, it dawns on most of us that we won’t live forever. We come to realize that what we do with this gift called life matters. It matters to us. To others – especially those we love. It matters to God. In our youth and again as we approach retirement age, we may emphasize that by naming out-loud our purpose in life or articulating our passions. Perhaps we even write up a bucket list of things we want to experience before our life comes to a close.

But the most profound way that we recognize that people don’t live forever is when someone we love dies. Most of us are pretty good at pushing that ultimate reality out of our minds until our hearts are broken with grief. You’ve been there, as have I. The call comes, the hospital beckons, the text message arrives with the poignant alert -- “I am so sorry to have to tell you ...”

And because we have experienced the sadness we feel when someone we love dies, we enter into this story from the Gospel of John not only with our minds but with our hearts wide open and raw with that memory of grief. The whole narrative about Lazarus runs from verse 1 to 44 and it is the kind of biblical story a congregation could spend a long time listening to and learning from. In a way, the Evangelist uses this chapter to retell the whole story of Jesus’ incarnation and ministry and to give a sneak preview of the resurrection that awaits on the far-side of the cross.

We know that Lazarus lived with his sisters, Mary and Martha, in the village of Bethany not far from Jerusalem. Jesus was often a guest in their home and we can only imagine the kind of casual conversations that occurred at that dining room table. Updates on other family and

friends, discussions of work and politics, commentaries on matters of faith within the Jewish community. What do you think -- did they dissect the sermon after Sabbath worship?

We don't know those ordinary details but this detail we do know. Jesus loved Lazareth and when the urgent word came that Lazarath was ill, Jesus took his time getting to Bethany. That's the back story on the anger and the frustration that is voiced by Mary when she kneels before Jesus with grief and reverence. ***"If only you had been here, Lord, my brother would not have died."* (11:32)**

Notice that Jesus does not argue with Mary or try explain his late arrival. He doesn't say – ***Get over it, Mary.*** Or, ***it was God's will*** – or any of the other ridiculous things we sometimes say to others to rush them through their grief. Rather, Jesus asks to be led to the burial site and Jesus himself begins to weep.

If you feel like Mary today, then just know that the congregation around you will carry you through that sad season. Know that Jesus weeps with you as he once wept outside the tomb of his friend, Lazarus.

And there he stands. Now in the company also of the other sister, Martha. She knows that her brother Lazarus is really dead and that his body, which she likely helped to bathe after he died, is a really dead body. So dead that now on the fourth day the stink of death is real and powerful. This is not a small rehearsal but the reality that awaits at the far-end of the arc that stretches out from our birth.

A week ago you completed the celebration of the 125th Anniversary of this congregation. The pictures on Facebook tell me that you had a great time at Oktoberfest and a spectacular liturgy on Sunday morning. Together, you shared the stories and memories that are the long history of this congregation.

But in the midst of that, I suspect you also wondered – What's next for Lutheran Church of the Redeemer at the corner of Dale and Carroll? What's next for any of our churches in this 21st century that seems so different than all the decades before?

As a bishop I am sometimes asked – *How does it feel to lead a dying institution? What are you going to do about the death of the church?* In this culture there is a lot of speculation about what lies ahead for congregations like Lutheran Church of the Redeemer with your big building in a context now marked by profound change. The trend lines don't look too promising for any of us who still care about the church. It would seem we are well along the arc from birth to death.

But that is not God's metric. All Saints' Day comes when we are about halfway to Easter. Not precisely. We are off by a few weeks, but today we are at the tipping point in the cycle of the church year. And who better than the saints of God to cheer us on?

When I was little we spoke of the ***church above*** and the ***church below***. Such imagery is not as fashionable as it once was but it is the language of our faith, our creeds. When we profess that we believe in the ***communion of saints*** we testify to the lives of all those who have lived and died in faith and trust in the Living God. The people named in the bulletin today, those for whom candles will be lit, and those whose love and memory we carry in our hearts. But we also turn to those who are part of the living body of Christ today – in this sanctuary, in churches

throughout Saint Paul (and not just the Lutherans!), and sisters and brothers all around the globe.

All Saints is a festival when we are called back to God's power to raise us from death to life. Just as Jesus called Lazarus to come out of the tomb where he was really dead and to step forward into life – here and now. If you think the Evangelist meant that only in a metaphoric way, peek ahead at the next chapter where a living Lazarus sits again at his place at the dinner table in his home in Bethany. Resurrection is not simply a consolation prize in a far-off time; it is the action of a Living God, here and now.

As a bishop, I have no idea what it is like to lead a dying church – unless that means a church that is dying and rising in the power of Jesus Christ -- because that is the only church that exists. Amazing things happen when we kneel like Mary at the feet of Jesus, crying out for him to do what only God can do. Unexpected and mighty things still happen when we are like Martha, expressing all our doubts and fears, and yet stepping aside in obedience to Jesus as the voice of God that calls us out of the tomb. I am so grateful for the privilege of being a gospel partner with you in that kind church.

You are now 125 years old **plus** one week. And I can tell you this about your future. It is God's future into which are being beckoned even as Lazarus was once called out of his tomb. Now it is our turn to be the courageous saints who are ready for God to be at work – in and through us – as we respond afresh to God's Word to a church that is halfway to Easter. Thanks be to God. AMEN.