

Sermon for All Saints, Year B

The Text: John 11:32-44

Lazarus was sick. The word had gone out – he may not get better.

People often get sick. Most of the time we get better. Sometimes we are told that we should not expect someone to get better.

That's hard to take. We may not want to believe that it is true. We may want to deny it. We don't like to think of anyone dying.

But we know that it is true. Sometimes it is sudden. Sometimes it takes a long time and waiting and watching is even harder than dying. Sooner or later we have to face the reality of death.

Lazarus did not get better. The illness was not that long. Lazarus died. Jesus knew.

What do you do when someone dies? We feel so helpless. But we want to be there, even if we cannot do anything.

There was lots going on for Jesus and his disciples. The plot against him, the threat against his own life was growing. The disciples said that he should not go.

Jesus went. Lazarus was a dear friend. But he was too late. When he got there Lazarus had already been buried. It took longer to communicate the message. It took longer to travel. And a body needed to be buried within a day.

Martha was busy. In time of bereavement, we get busy. It is hard to stop. There's lots to get done, lots to arrange, and people to attend to. It also helps, not to think too much, not to feel too deeply.

Martha is the hostess. Jesus and his disciples are coming. In spite of her grief, she wants to be a good hostess. She runs out to meet him.

When you are grieving it is good to have people around you.

Martha has lots of questions. Could she have done something to stop it? Could Jesus have done something? She is angry – why wasn't Jesus here when they needed him?

When someone dies, we have questions. They go through our mind. What could I have done different? Is there someone who could have saved this life?

At the bottom is the big question – why? How can a living person turn into a cold body? Where has the person gone? And what does it mean? What does it mean, when a life ends?

Martha has faith. She believes. She believes in God. She believes in life that goes beyond death. She believes in resurrection. *I know he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day*, she says.

Death confronts us with the big questions of life. What does it mean, when we see life drained from a person?

Faith says that there is more than what we see. Faith says that there is life beyond this lifeless body. Faith says that there will be new life, that there will be resurrection. When you lose a life, faith means that you look again at the God who gives life.

But we still wonder. We still struggle. Our faith is tested. Is it real? Or is it just nice words?

Jesus tells Martha that there is much more to faith. Faith is not just a vague hope that things will be better.

Jesus tells her to look at him: *I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even if they die; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.*

Now Martha claims this faith. *Yes, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was promised to come into the world.*

Now it is a personal faith. All of God's promises are wrapped up in this man called Jesus. He is the Son of God, and he bears within himself the gift of life as God has given it, the perfect life, the holy life.

He has come into the world as promised and he shares life with us, and he faces death with us. It is Jesus Christ who has the power of life and the power to overcome death, to lead us through life and carry us through death.

Jesus invites the grieving Martha to put her faith in him. Jesus invites us, whenever we grieve, to put our faith in him.

Mary doesn't hide her emotions under activity. She expresses her grief in tears. Lots of her friends are there too. They don't know what to say. But they share her tears.

Probably you have cried too. You have cried in times of grief and loss. You have cried with a deep empathy for others who have experienced the pain of death.

Jesus came. He felt her grief and he felt his own grief. Lazarus had been his friend too and he felt the tragedy of losing his friend. Jesus was *deeply moved in spirit, and troubled.*

He felt the loss of his friend Lazarus. He carried the burden of every death. Jesus cries his own tears too.

Jesus had missed the funeral. But he asked to be taken to the tomb, where the body had been laid. It was a cave, with shelves cut into the rock sides, and a large stone rolled across the entrance.

Do you go to a cemetery when you want to be close to someone who is no longer with you? When you want to remember?

Or do you have a special place, a place that still belongs to your loved one, where you can go when you want to bring your thoughts and feelings?

Jesus came to the tomb where Lazarus had been buried. But he was not content to sit and ponder.

Jesus asked them to take away the stone. He was ready to confront, even the smell of death, the decay of death.

Jesus defies death and speaks to the dead man. And in his words is the power of life.

Jesus calls: *Lazarus, come out!* At his word the dead man is raised to life. Still wrapped in his grave cloths, he shuffles out.

Jesus had said: *I am the resurrection and the life.* Jesus showed his will to face death and his power to conquer death. It was the same will with which he faced his own death on the cross. It was the same power of life with which he was raised from his tomb to a life of glory beyond death.

Jesus had said: *All those who believe in me will live, even if they die. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die.*

He showed his power to give life even when Lazarus had died. Death was not the end of life, or the end of hope. Under the word of Jesus, Lazarus was given life once more.

And under the word of Jesus, you are given a life, a life with your God, and that life is never taken away by death.

Death is not the end of life. Dying becomes the gateway through which your life with Christ continues. In death you receive a life in the glory of your God.

Who are the saints? The saints are the holy ones of God.

When you think of saints think first of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the holy sinless Son of God. It is Jesus who gives his holiness to his people.

The saints of God are not those who have achieved a superior life for themselves. The saints of God are those who have been given holiness by the grace of God gifted by Jesus Christ. The saints of God are not those who somehow have managed to live their lives without sin. Rather, the saints are those whose sins are forgiven.

Where are the saints? The saints are with Jesus Christ. The saints are with Jesus Christ right here, because Jesus Christ is here, and through his Spirit our Lord Jesus Christ takes our broken lives and makes them whole, sees our sins and forgives them, carries us through life, and carries us through our dying.

We are the saints of God, not because of who we are, but because we live in the grace and mercy of our God.

And the saints are with Jesus Christ in glory. The saints are those who have been carried through death into the fullness of the holy life in God's presence. The saints are those who live to praise and glorify God – forever.

We believe in the saints of God – we believe in the communion of saints – because we believe in Jesus Christ. That is the faith that carries us when we face illness, and when we face our own dying. That is the faith that gives us hope and confidence when we experience the death and loss of those whom we love.

When we feel the loss most deeply, we come to Jesus Christ, and find in Christ the Holy One, who unites the saints on earth and the saints in heaven. Amen.