

# “For All the Saints” – Marjory Zoet Bankson

November 1, 2015



Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

## Texts:

A feast of rich food for ALL peoples ... Isa 25:6-9

I saw a new heaven and a new earth ... Revelation 21:1-6a

Raising of Lazarus ... John 11:32-44

**Today** we celebrate all the saints who have gone before us in the worldwide family of God. In a religious tradition that goes back at least to the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Christians have marked this day to honor those people who have made the spirit of Christ visible to others. At first, All Saints celebrated those whom the church had canonized. Later, it became a celebration of all baptized Christians, saintly or not. In predominantly Catholic countries, it is often known as the “Day of the Dead,” when families visit the graves of their loved ones with flowers and food.

A year ago today, I, too, was scrubbing the moss off of the graves of my ancestors in Lynden, Washington: first, my parents, then my grandparents, and my father’s grandparents, who had come there from Holland. While Jacqie Wallen preached here at Seekers, I was doing church differently by walking among those immigrants who left their homeland in search of a better life in America. Most never went back, even for a visit. One of the first things they did as a congregation was to buy land for a cemetery. For them, it was a singular act of freedom from state controlled burials and it claimed this land as their new home.

**In the Gospel reading for today**, Jesus comes late to the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Mary and Martha are disappointed and angry that he did not get there in time to save their brother from death, and they let Jesus know how they felt. Always

the practical one, Martha blurts out that her brother's body will be a stinking mess when Jesus tells the onlookers to roll away the stone from his grave.

If we take this story literally, it's a perfect text for All Saints Day, because it demonstrates that somebody who has been dead for four days or more can be physically "raised from the dead." We call that resuscitation. And when I looked at the trick-or-treaters at my door on Halloween, that idea – of the living dead – seems to be running through the costume departments in northern Virginia at least. Zombies came to our door in all sizes and shapes.

But if we see the Gospel of John as a well-constructed narrative of Jesus' life and ministry which was to be read again and again in small, gathered communities like ours, then we can hear the rehearsal for Jesus' resurrection in this story. In common, they have committed but reluctant disciples, dedicated but questioning insiders, an entombed body and anointing women, a surprising revelation of new life and a resulting directive to the hearers.

I hope you will go home and read the whole story of Mary, Martha and Lazarus in John 11 and 12, and then read the resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene and then to the disciples in John 20. In our text for today, the story ends with the command to the surrounding community to "unbind" the still-wrapped body of Lazarus. It seems to say that God has the power to bring new life to the dead places in our own lives, but we need a community to "unbind" us from the wrappings of prejudice, habit and fear.

In the prefigured story of Jesus' resurrection, the story ends with a statement of blessing: "Blessed are those who have NOT seen and yet have come to believe."

So, what does it mean for us to believe what we have not witnessed directly? In other words, how do we understand the difference between the resuscitation of Lazarus, and the resurrection of Christ?

In this age of scientific inquiry and physical evidence, how are we to hold the notion that all the saints might be gathered around us like a great "cloud of witnesses," cheering us on in this marathon of physical embodiment that we live out, day to day? And what difference does that cloud of witnesses make for us?

**Story.** In 1987, just two years after I took on the job of keeping Faith At Work alive, I got "the call" from my middle sister, who was in Bellingham, Washington, with my dying father. His death was no surprise. When he could not digest food anymore and chose no more medical intervention, we had been told that it would take 7-10 days. But it had been 40 days, and I was getting ready for a critical board meeting to decide the future of Faith At Work. Should I go? Or stay for the board meeting and go then?

Of course, Peter was away for his work. I had no-one at home to talk it over with. I paced the floor most of the night, and then decided to abandon the board meeting and pay for a full-price ticket to Seattle if I could get a flight. In those days, before the Internet, there was no way to know whether I could get a small plane flight on to Bellingham from there, but I decided to take my chances – to trust that love or God or something would make a way for me.

As you can imagine, my thoughts and prayers were filled with memories and prayers for my father. Somewhere over Kansas maybe, a single image settled in. There he was, lying in the hospital bed which I had arranged for in my last visit, in front of the large picture windows, looking out at a sunset over Puget Sound. The colors were vivid in back of his white sheeted bed. Standing at the end of his bed was his mother, dressed in her Sunday-go-to-meeting dark suit, with her hat on and purse over her arm, saying (as she stretched out her hand), “Come on August, it’s time to go.”

I saw him reach out his hand, toward hers, and said (in my heart), “Dad, don’t wait for me. We’ve said our good-byes. Go on home now.” And for the longest time, the scene stayed with me, while the sunset faded behind his bed into darkness – as dawn reached through the windows of the plane and we descended into SeaTac airport.

When I called from there, my younger sister said “He died about an hour ago, but we’ll keep his body here until you can get here. Let me know if you can get the plane to Bellingham, because it’s really foggy here.”

When I finally got there, his body was cold and stiff, but his face was peaceful. The pain was gone, and with all the weight he had lost, he looked young – much as I remembered him from childhood. I felt grateful that his long struggle with colon cancer was finally over; grateful that my sisters had kept him there so I could complete my journey too.

Then we called the mortuary, for the hearse which was to take him down to Seattle, to the medical school where his body might be useful for doctors-in-the-making.

After the bustle of removing his body, we were sitting at the dining room table, having a cup of tea, when my younger sister said, “You know, the funniest thing happened about an hour before he died. He’d been in a coma for nearly 12 hours, completely comatose. But he raised up on one elbow, and reached out, like somebody was there, talking to him.”

And so I told them about my vision of Grandma Zoet, standing there in her church clothes, holding out her hand. Barb said, “That’s exactly the way it looked – like Grandma was standing there, inviting him to come.” She said that she’d put her hand in his, and said “You can go now, dad. Everything will be all right.”

Was it real? For me, it was.

Was it true? Yes, it was.

Could we prove it? Of course not.

But I think scripture is like that, describing what we have imagination and language for. Proof comes in other ways, like telling the story or living out of love and trust, rather than fear. "Blessed are those who believe, but have not seen."

**Today is All Saints Day** – a time when we celebrate the lives of those who have gone before us on the path to becoming who we are, and how we are in the world. My grandmother, Flossina Zebnerdina Zylstra, took us in when we were homeless during World War II. My dad was in New Guinea, in an Army field hospital. My mom was in a TB sanitarium as a patient, down near Seattle. I was four, and my sister was two. I don't know what would have happened to us if she hadn't taken us in.

**As a community**, we gather each week to confess our brokenness and celebrate God's miraculous gift of being able to love each other toward wholeness once again. While we are alive, whether we can see it or not, we have an astonishing power to love, to forgive, and to re-member as this particular Body of Christ, here and now. Jesus showed us how to do it beyond the lines of family and tribe.

Today we hold in our common memory the people whose tiles have been added to our Memory Wall in the back stairwell. I will simply read the names, and their relationship to Seekers, followed by a chime and some gathered silence. After the service, I hope you will take the time to visit the Memory Wall, and to look at the Memory Book which contains the stories of those people – along with some who are not dead yet. I hope this will inspire you to write your own story, add your own picture, so it will be there when it is time to add your tile to the wall.

Let us prepare our hearts to hold the memories of the saints we are honoring today at Seekers:

- William "Bill" Dietrich, the spiritual father of Jesse Palidofsky;
- Cam Leger, husband of Liz Gould-Leger;
- Karen Imhoff, who regarded Seekers as her church community;
- Jane Lieper, an early member of Seekers;
- Al Martin, first husband of Michele Frome;
- Eric Underhill Wallen, son of Jackie Wallen;
- Sharon Wilkens, part of Emily Gilbert's chosen family.

It seems especially appropriate that we always celebrate communion on All Saints Day, because it was a meal shared by Jesus and his disciples as they prepared for

his death and whatever they could comprehend about the meaning of resurrection. The bread, a reminder that our physical bodies do indeed die. And the cup, a reminder of the spiritual presence of those who have loved us into being. Around the circle, we are once again “broken and whole, all at once,” surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses.

As the prophet Isaiah said, it is a rich feast, this simple serving of bread and cup – an invitation that we are called to live into the vision of a new heaven and a new earth, the one that Jesus showed us again and again.

May this be good news for us, now and always.

Amen.