

Today is All Saint's Sunday on the Church calendar. It's a time for us to come together to remember and honor the lives of those who have gone before us. This celebration invites us to reflect on their legacy, their faith, and the indelible marks they have left on our lives and our community. As we remember them, we will explore the messages contained in John's Gospel account of Jesus raising Lazarus, and a brief passage from Revelation. The Scriptures offer us great comfort in our grief and a powerful hope in the promises of God.

To recap the Gospel story we heard earlier, Jesus arrives in Bethany, where Lazarus, His dear friend, has died. Lazarus' sisters, Martha and Mary, are in mourning, surrounded by friends who are sharing in their grief. When Mary approaches Jesus, her words are heavy with grief. "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died," (John 11:32). Her statement captures a feeling which many of us have in times of loss – questions of timing, purpose, and the heart-wrenching reality of separation.

The striking thing about the passage is not just the sorrow – but Jesus' deep empathy. We heard, with the kids, that "Jesus wept," (verse 35). Remember, this is happening publicly. How often do we put our emotions on display publicly – especially us guys? Not very often. Society tells us "Real men don't cry," but here's Jesus, the realest version of Man that's ever walked the Earth, and He wept. We see the heart of Christ here. He enters our pain, our grief. In our sorrows, He's not distant. He's intimately present. This act of Jesus weeping reminds us that it is human to feel deep sorrow in the face of death. Jesus doesn't diminish our grief – He acknowledges it.

So, the group approaches the tomb, and Jesus commands, "Take the stone away," (verse 39), prays (verse 41-42), and then calls "in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'" (verse 43). And Lazarus, who had been dead for four days – he needs a shower – comes out, wrapped in the linens he'd been buried in. Only Jesus – only God – has power over death. His raising of Lazarus reminds us of the ultimate victory over death which He offers to all who believe in Him, which He demonstrates at His own resurrection. The resurrection scene of Easter morning is our sign that death does not have the final word. And so, for our saints, as we remember them, we're reminded that they are a part of this resurrection promise. Their lives were not extinguished – rather, they were transformed – and they now dwell with Christ in eternity. With this in mind, let's turn to Revelation 21:1-6. **Read Revelation 21:1-6.**

According to Church tradition, John the son of Zebedee is the author of the book of Revelation. In our reading this morning, we find a beautiful promise of hope. "Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first and the first earth had passed away," (Rev. 21:1). John's statement of "a new heaven and a new earth" is a quote from Isaiah

65:17, where God tells Isaiah, “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.” John then goes on to say, “and there was no longer any sea,” (verse 1b).

The sea is a beautiful thing. But in many cases the sea – the oceans – serve as barriers to people. The idea that John is trying to convey throughout this passage would be like us trying to explain Disney World to Eskimos who had no outside interactions with anyone in the world. No television, no electricity, no wi-fi. Their world would consist of snow and ice. And to think that a place exists where millions of people visit, with all sorts of plants, animals, and various activities and attractions – how would you explain Disney World to people who had such a limited understanding of the world around them? How would you – if you were also someone with no access to television, electricity, or wi-fi – try to explain what you had seen in a place like Disney World?

So, John’s ability to express his understanding of what he sees in the vision to us is naturally limited because he doesn’t necessarily understand everything he’s seeing in the first place. We also need to understand that despite our best attempts, our human languages fail to encompass and describe the Sovereign Majesty of Almighty God. The point, though, is what he says next.

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God, (verses 2-3).

John’s vision is one of ultimate restoration and renewal. It reveals God’s intention to live with His people, and to make all people His. Next, we’re told, “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away,” (verse 4). It’s another quote, this time from Isaiah 25:8, “He will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; He will remove the disgrace of His people from all the earth. The Lord has spoken.”

When God comes down to live with humanity at the very end, He wipes every tear away and destroys death. This is the culmination of God’s redemptive plan – a world where pain, suffering, and sorrow are extinguished. “He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ Then He said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true,’” (Rev. 21:5). Who is seated on the throne? That’s Jesus – God – speaking from the throne. He also says, “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life,” (verse 6).

Just as Lazarus was called back to life, the vision in Revelation assures us that God is in the business of making all things new. The resurrection we celebrate today is a foreshadowing of the new creation. It gives us a deep sense of hope and purpose in the present – even when we find ourselves in tremendous grief and despair.

Since my appointment here in July 2020, we haven't done an All Saint's Service of Remembrance. Momentarily we'll honor and remember the saints who have passed on to Glory from our church family since July 2020. Many churches do something like this on an annual basis. Prior to COVID shutting things down, the first worship service held each year during Annual Conference in Hoover Auditorium at Lakeside was a Service of Remembrance – a time to reflect on the saints who have left an indelible mark on the development of our faith.

Each saint we'll mention – and you'll have an opportunity to mention some, too – represents a story of faith, perseverance, and love. They represented for us a reflection of Christ. In hindsight, we're able to see how they embodied the hope of resurrection. They taught us, encouraged us, and walked with us in our own journeys of faith.

They faced challenges and sorrows, but through it all, they pointed us ever onward toward Christ. And so, with remembering them, we're also called to re-member – reconnect – to their collective legacy as a local church. Their lives are testimonies of faithfulness and love, and they continue to encourage us to live out our own faith with boldness. We are called to embody the love of Christ, just like they did.

We're called to use our talents, gifts, and skills to bring God glory, just like they did. In times of grief, we're called to remind each other that we are not alone. Like Mary and Martha, we can lean on one another. The promise of resurrection should give us great hope – even in the face of insurmountable trials. We trust that God is working out all things for the good of those who love Him. We can look with anticipation at the new creation with our spiritual eyes – a new heaven and earth where sorrow and pain will be no more. And we can allow the Gospel of Christ living in and through us to transform how we live, just like the saints did.

Back in 1984, Ronald Reagan was running for reelection and came by train to Sidney. I was in Cub Scouts, and my dad was our scout master. So, when Reagan stepped off the train, Dad picked me up and stood me on his shoulders so I could see the President of the United States. I could see the President over the huge crowd.

In a very real, and mysterious way, you and I stand on the shoulders of the saints. Their examples are part of who we are. They hold us up so we can have a clearer view of God. In a few minutes, though our eyes cannot see them – because they are now with Christ – we'll join them around His Table.

Before we do that, though, I would like to take a moment to remember the saints of our local church. As I call each name, think about the impact they have had in your life, the memories you cherish, and the lessons you learned from them:

Bob Morris;
Royal Cotterman, Sr.;
Delbert Doak;
Keith Motter;
Connie Kauffman;
Janet Motter-Knasel;
Becky Wacker;
Erma Cotterman;
Shirley Sheffer;
Geri Roberts;
Larry Slagle;
Sandi Bowman;
Carol Ann Slagle;
Tom Larger;
Bob Berryman;
Susan Fry;
Carolyn Stone.

Church, I know there are others. What friends or family members do you have that I've missed, that you want to lift up?

Song: I Can Only Imagine

We celebrate the lives of the saints we have lost, knowing their stories are woven into the greater narrative of God's redemption. Their faith encourages us to press on, trusting in the promise of resurrection which only Christ alone can give us, because He is the Resurrection and the Life.

Prayer: Almighty God, You knit together Your elect in one communion in the body of Your Son Jesus Christ. Give us grace to so follow the examples of Your saints in faithfulness and godly living, that we might come to experience those joys which You have prepared for those who truly love You, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.