



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

NOVEMBER 1, 2015
ALL SAINTS SUNDAY

Come Forth!
Isaiah 25:6-9; John 11:32-44

Silence settled over the crowd gathered in front of the now-opened tomb like thick fog on a winter's morning. It was a dead silence, so to speak, because as Jesus' words fell into the tomb, all breath was held waiting to see if life would come out. Lazarus was dead. Mary and Martha's hearts were broken by the weight of their grief. The rest of the community shared a deep sadness over the death of their friend. Jesus had let them down by not coming sooner. Now he was calling for Lazarus to come forth? Into what? And as what? It was a dead silence.

Moments before the air was filled with the sounds of sniffles and sobs as Mary and Martha and their friends wept for Lazarus. So palpable was this grief that Jesus also began to weep. It was not just that his eyes became cloudy with emotion; rather, tears streamed down his face through his beard and into the dust below, bathing his feet once again.

It had been four days since Lazarus had been laid in the tomb, but it must have seemed like an eternity from the time Jesus called his name until Lazarus shuffled out of the stone grave. Sometimes a sad silence can last a long time.

I suspect most of us know what that kind of silence is like. It is the aching silence of never again hearing a loved one's voice except on the telephone answering machine or a voicemail message left undeleted. It is the silence of an empty chair, a familiar face missing from the Christmas photo, the unmistakable footsteps never again coming down the hall. The silence of grief is heard in the missing beats of our own hearts, the pauses in our thoughts that cannot be explained, the sobs so deep that they cannot even whisper anymore. It is the silence of unknowing.

In some ways, when we are grieving, I think we pause along with Mary and Martha—and even Jesus—to see if Lazarus is going to come out of the tomb after all. We wonder if even God can bring life out of death. We wonder if God can bring us life out of the death of someone we love.

The Hebrew people knew grief. They knew the grief of enslavement and the grief of leaving behind all that was familiar for an unknown land of promise. They knew the grief of not trusting God, of defeat from their enemies, of going through the motions of life but not really living. The psalmist lamented, “You have fed [your people] with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure” (Psalm 80:5). It is a feast of sorrow that neither satisfies nor nourishes.

Yet, tears are not to be scorned. Some tears are considered gifts because they reveal the depths of our love and gratitude. Catherine of Sienna, a laywoman of the fourteenth century, spoke eloquently about the relationship of tears and love:

I have told you how tears well up from the heart: The heart gathers them up from its burning desire and holds them out to the eyes. Just as green wood, when it is put into the fire, weeps tears of water in the heat because it is still green (if it were dry it would not weep), so does the heart weep when it is made green again by the renewal of grace, after the desiccating dryness of selfishness has been drawn out of the soul . . . So love exerts a holy longing and with that longing the eyes weep.¹

Our love for one another, consecrated by the love of God for us, is a holy love that causes us to weep when someone we love, or a dream, or a hope, or a part of who we are dies. But we are not without hope for just as surely as Jesus called Lazarus to come forth from his tomb, so also Jesus calls us to come forth from the tombs of our own grief. Jesus stands before whatever tomb it is that holds our love, our dreams, our hopes, our accumulated sorrows and Jesus weeps. Jesus weeps because God cares for us and is heartbroken whenever our hearts are broken. Jesus weeps because he came that we might have life (John 10:10) and suffers when anything diminishes that life. Then Jesus catches his breath, clears his throat, wipes his eyes, and looks straight into the darkness that has us in its grip and calls in a voice steady and certain, “Come forth! Come forth and live the life I have given to you!” We need not hold our breath for a fresh breeze of the sweet air of life blows over us as we walk forward into the newness of life with Christ. Our tears may well be a testament of love to the ones we

¹Catherine of Sienna, *The Dialogue*, trans. And intro. Suzanne Noffke, OP (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 170; as cited in Wendy M. Wright, “Tears of a Greening Heart,” *Weavings* (March/April 2000), 14.

have lost, but our lives are also a testament of trust in the One who gives us life.

Among other responsibilities, Sister Suzanne Mayer, is a pastoral counselor. Several years ago she attended an exhibition of some of the last paintings of the Dutch artist Vincent Van Gogh. While no one has ever been able to accurately diagnose Van Gogh's illness or issues, it is clear that he was often tormented by a darkness that threatened to overshadow his artistic genius and which eventually shortened his life.

Sister Mayer marveled that Van Gogh was able to rise above his demons time and again. As she moved through the exhibit she noticed the emphasis on light and beauty, wonder and energy. Stepping into the final gallery, a single painting obscured the rest of the exhibit and offered Van Gogh's ultimate statement on his work and life. It was a small painting, roughly two and a half by three feet, but it was enormous in its effect. In her words, ". . . the whole wall opened up with the deep cerulean blue of a horizon in southern France. Powdered across the intense panorama small tufts of white blossoms dotted the dark branches." The masterpiece titled "Blossoming Almond Tree" had been painted when Van Gogh heard that his nephew and namesake had been born. It was completed shortly before his own death. For Sister Suzanne it spoke those ancient words: "I set before you today life and death; choose life."²

Those words of God spoken by Moses were offered to a people languishing between the death of oppression in Egypt and the life of promise in a new land. "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life that you and your descendants may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

When we are caught between life and death, when the silence of our grief overwhelms us, God in Christ calls to us: "Come forth. Choose life." Jesus did and so may we. Thanks be to God. Amen.

²Sister Suzanne Mayer, "Choose Life: the Resilience of Vincent Van Gogh," *Weavings* (vol. XXVIII, No. 2, 2013), 16.

All Saints Sunday Homily

In the West African country of Liberia, a story is often told in the days following death:

Once upon a time in a small village in West Africa, there lived a hunter with his wife and seven sons. One day the hunter went into the forest alone to hunt and did not return at nightfall. His family wondered why he did not come back. They talked about it for some days, but after a while when he did not come back, they stopped talking about it.

Then one day his wife gave birth to another son. As he grew older he began to talk, and when he could talk, the first thing he said was, "Where is my father?" "Good question," the others replied. "He should have come back a long time ago." Another son said, "Something must have happened to him. We should go looking." "But where will we find him?" asked another son.

"I saw him go." One son said. "If you follow me, I can show you the trail he took."

And so the sons followed the trail. Finally, in a clearing, they found the bones and rusted weapons of their father. He had obviously been killed by some great beast.

Another son stepped forward. "I can put his bones together." And he did.

Another son said, "I know how to cover the skeleton with muscle and flesh." And he did.

Then another son said, "I can put blood in his body." Another said, "I can put breath into his body." With this the hunter began to breath. Then another son said, "I can help him to move, and he did and the hunter got up and stretched his bones." Then another son said, "I can give him the power of speech." With this the hunter said, "Let us go home."

They went home and the hunter's wife gave him a great feast inviting everyone in the village. In celebration of his return, the hunter made a switch from the tail of a cow and decorated it with cowery shells. Everyone wanted it.

After the feast, the hunter called for silence. "I would like to give this beautiful cow-tail switch, to the one who is most responsible for bringing me back to life." Immediately there was an uproar as each brother had an opinion.

"It is surely me," said the son who showed his brothers the path that helped them to find their father.

"But without me he wouldn't have come back to life," said the one who laid out the bones. "Breath is more important than bones," said another son. "What is life without movement?" said another. On and on they went. Finally the hunter called for silence. "I will give this cow-tail switch to my youngest son," he said, "for he was the one who remembered me. It is said, that a person is not truly dead, until he is forgotten."³

While we have come together today to honor those persons in our congregation who have died in the past year, we know that they continue to live in the presence of God. Lest they cease to live in our memories and hearts, we continue to remember them and the ones who loved them most and who grieve so strongly. We remember them, because in their memory they continue to live and move and speak. They continue to be important to us because we loved them and they loved us. They continue to live in the great memory of God for whom death is not an ending but a beginning of a new realm of life. They continue to live because of the salvation offered to us all through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

³Harold Courlander, "The Cow-Tail Switch," in *The Cow-Tail Switch*, (New York: Henry Holt & Co. 1947).

November 1, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Holy God who is the source of every blessing and the giver of every good gift, the heavens tell of your glory and the earth sings your praises, from the vibrant colors that accent our world to the gentle songs of the birds that punctuate the air. All that you have created points to a God, who, out of extravagant love, gives not only what is necessary and useful, but also what is enjoyable and beautiful. Because of your great love for us, you invite us to feast at your table, walk beside us in every season of life, and call us to share the good news of your salvation. Before we were yet born, you, O Lord, have been with us and have cared for us. In the dark places of our lives, you have been the light that will not fail. We praise you for your constant goodness to us and your faithful presence with us.

Eternal God, hope of all who trust in you, in Christ you weep with those who mourn even as you cry out in triumph over the grave. Unbind us from sin, release us from captivity, and with Lazarus, call us forth from death to life. On this day of remembrance and celebration, we are especially grateful for the great cloud of witnesses that has gone before us. We praise you for those faithful men and women whose lives have given witness to the example and teachings of Christ, who have worked for the causes of peace and justice in our world. From their example of courage and diligence, may we learn to love you with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. With joyful hearts and with voices strong and clear, may we join that great chorus of saints who forever sings praise to your holy name. O Love that will not let us go, we rest our weary souls in the promise that you are our strength for this day and the hope for all our days to come, through Jesus Christ our Lord whose mercies never fail. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Edwards
Associate Minister