

Soul Reunions

All Saints Day Sermon on John 11

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Trinity United, Ottawa

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The All Saints gospel reading is the story of the resurrection of Lazarus, unique to the Gospel of John. Written towards the end of the first century, John's gospel is most removed in time from the words and actions of the historical Jesus. But it is known as 'the mystical gospel,' the most cosmic in its scope of storytelling about a Jesus, who had by then been raised by his followers to the mythological status of a middle-eastern god.

You can hear in this story images and words that foreshadow Jesus' own death and resurrection. Hear also, Jesus and Mary and Martha experiencing several of the stages of grieving -anger, denial, sadness. In your own loss, make room for those feelings, knowing that our Christ weeps with us.

Reading of John 11:32-44

When someone close to us dies, our souls instinctively cry out to God for nothing less than what Mary and Martha got. Engulfed in grief, we need our loved one resurrected. We yearn for reunion. We hope against hope for that miracle. Just let me be with her again! Let my love be another Lazarus!

The initial experience of loss can be so deep as to overshadow the very joy of being alive. Many a mother or father, many a lover, in the immediate wake of death, would welcome their own mortality, hurrying toward a hoped-for reunion with the beloved.

During the 'Seeker's Guide' workshop Bob and I participated in at The Omega Institute in August, a young mother shared her anguish at losing her little girl to cancer. She admitted that for the past year, she'd looked forward to dying, in anticipation of reunion with her only child. Our hearts all opened to her and hoped for her healing.

When we are one step back from personal loss, we can perhaps appreciate that our mortality, the finitude of our lifespan, is the dark sky against which we are able to see the shining stars of everyday life. Death is the deadline that teaches us to savour each day we are given. Death is the limitation that sets us searching for the meaning of life, and calls us to live our lives fully - now. Encounters with death remind us to love and to love life, every day.

But in that first personal moment of loss, death feels as if it has no redeeming value. Like Lazarus' sisters Martha and Mary, perhaps we accuse the God, who we think might have made things different, of abandoning us. Like Jesus himself we are "deeply disturbed in Spirit" - though that translation leaves out his anger, evident in the Hebrew word 'embrimbaomai'.

For many of us, the healing comfort we can access in this story, is not the physical resurrection of Lazarus - we don't really expect our loved one to come out from their tomb. But we may find our pain eased a little by the companionship of grieving with Jesus and Mary and Martha. Sharing this exquisite pain with the holiest and ordinaryest of humans makes ours more bearable. The permission we may find in this story to rage against death, to protect our self for a time with denial, or just to weep out our anguish, even in public...that can help.

All Saints & All Souls Day today follows All Hallows Eve, the admittedly rather frivolous way that our culture acknowledges the life of soul or 'spirit', beyond this mortal incarnation. In this context, the story of the resurrection of Lazarus offers us metaphorical medicine. It ignites our hope of close encounters with our lost loved ones. This reunion hope -that our loved ones continue on in their souls journey, sometimes intersecting with our - is rooted in our scripture stories. But it also can also claim the credibility of quantum possibility, that *real* cosmic reality, which is so much bigger than what our senses can ordinarily perceive or our logical brains can process.

I have faith in what Christianity calls a 'resurrection reality.' For me, the hope of

reunion is real. It is based on the experiences of ‘soul reunions’ with loved ones, like several of you have shared with me. Soul reunions are our encounters with the ‘dead but not departed,’ that happen in dreams and awakened states.

The gift I gave thanks for from my Omega retreat, was one of those mystical meetings. That Sunday morning in August, Elizabeth Lesser led a guided meditation into the Landscape of the Soul. We prepared ourselves to walk toward our own death. We were invited to pack one bag - to prepare ourselves. We set out walking at first with others, then alone. We had to leave our bag behind. We approached a mountain path, winding steep toward the clouds.

Up till this time, lying on my back on the carpet, eyes closed, I was conscious of following her cues with my active imagination...trying a little too hard, to see myself in this journey. But then she invited us to see ‘someone’ coming to meet us. I was utterly surprised to see my father coming down the path toward me. My dad, who died fifteen years ago. Smiling at me again. His unique eyes - irises of two different colours - shining into mine. His arms inviting a hug. No words, as usual. But his presence. I could feel him with me. It felt wonderful!

I lay on the carpet with tears of joy dripping into my ears for a long, warm while. Later, when I shared this experience with my eldest sister, she was tearful too. We got to share dad’s love with each other again. What a blessing!

During that soul meditation at Omega, the mom who lost her daughter received a resurrection gift too. She told us, through a river of her own healing tears, that she ‘heard from’ her daughter. She understood that her little girl wanted her to live her life - to enjoy her life again - and not think about dying. The woman smiled as she told us about this, saying that perhaps now, she really could!

Sometimes we just have to ‘*unbind*’ our loved one from the limitations of the way we used to know them. We have to take the leap of faith and “*let him go*” from the

mortal body that has decayed. And then, like the living Christ, he will be with us again, intangible but equally real.

Soul reunions happen. In the words of the Gospel of John: “*Though they die, they live again.*” In this sense, resurrection is absolutely real.

Thanks be to the God of mystery who is something more.

Have faith. Grieve free into peace.

Amen.