



“FAITH UNBOUND”

John 11:32-44

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Good morning, saints! Good morning, sinners! At least now we know where everyone is seated this morning.

With the election just around the corner, I couldn't help but remember a comic strip from one of my favorite comics, *Kudzu* by the late Doug Marlette. One of the main characters is a southern pastor in the town of Bypass, North Carolina. His name is the Rev. Will B. Dunn. On one particular day before the presidential election season several years ago, the Rev. Dunn finds himself on his knees praying steadfastly to the Lord. Have you ever been there; praying earnestly before the Lord, looking for an answer; searching for a sign from God?

Rev. Dunn begins, “Just checking in, Lord...Thy Will B. Dunn! Lord, Lord, if you don't want me running for President in 2008, give me a sign!”

In the next frame, you see a lightning bolt and the word “ZAP” in big bold letters.

As the frames progress, there is a slightly charred Rev. Dunn continuing, “...a sign that I should quit and go back to my pastoral duties...”

Again, ZAP! And Rev. Dunn continues, “...just some indication...”

ZAP! Again, Rev. Dunn continues, “...that we preachers have no business in politics!”

ZAP! “A sign, Lord, just give me a SIGN! AMEN!” And one more huge ZAP!

By this time, Rev. Dunn is totally charred, from head to toe. Even still, he raises his finger and says, “Oh, well—onward to the campaign!”

Friends, have you ever asked God for a sign?

In the verses preceding our scripture lesson this morning, Jesus had been with his disciples in Jerusalem. In fact, just a few days earlier, Mary and Martha had sent word to Jesus that his good friend, their brother, Lazarus, was ill. Upon receiving that word, however, Jesus stayed two days

longer in Jerusalem before heading out to Bethany, which was only a couple of miles away. He could have been there in no time, but instead he tarried along the way.

When Jesus finally arrived in Bethany, he discovered that his friend, Lazarus, had been in the tomb for four days. Everyone else has gathered around Mary and Martha to console these two sisters in their grief. Both sisters approach Jesus with almost the same words. We hear Mary's rebuke in our lesson today, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Remember that Martha was the one who was so busy in the kitchen getting dinner ready the last time he came. Mary was busying herself by sitting at Jesus' feet. They were close to Jesus. They knew the miracles that he had performed in the past, but Lazarus was dead now. Death somehow puts him beyond the possibility of a miracle. Death is final. Had Jesus arrived earlier, Lazarus might have been healed. But probably not now. They may have witnessed signs and miracles that Jesus had accomplished in the past, but death was a whole new realm beyond what they had seen him do to this point in his ministry. Perhaps a few days before this, they had prayed for a sign that somehow Lazarus might survive. Now, however, as death has set in, they were far beyond any sign that might appear.

Witnessing the depth of their mourning, the gospel writer tells us that Jesus is "disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." In fact, John tells us that "Jesus wept." In the face of Lazarus' death and the deep grief of his friends, Jesus weeps with them for a moment as he sets off in the direction of Lazarus' tomb.

Today is All Saints Sunday in our life together as the body of Christ. When we speak of saints in our tradition, we speak of those whose faithful example has brought us somehow closer to Jesus in our faith journey. On this special day, we often pause to celebrate the lives of those who have passed on to the Church eternal and triumphant throughout this past year. Like Jesus at Lazarus' tomb, we may weep with their families as we also remember the way their witness to Jesus Christ impacted our lives. We cry and we celebrate as we mourn, share comfort with those around us, and hope together in life eternal.

When Jesus approached Lazarus' tomb, there was a stone that had been placed in front of the entrance. Turning to those gathered around him, he instructed them, "Take away the stone." Martha must have thought that Jesus was out of his mind. She knew how long her brother's body had been in that tomb. She said, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days."

Jesus, however, is undeterred. He turns to Martha and asks, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took the stone away. In the meantime, Jesus begins to pray. He prays that those gathered around might come to believe. By his words and his actions, he draws those around him closer to God.

Following his prayer, Jesus speaks into the tomb, "Lazarus, come out." And the gospel writer tells us that "The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth."

On All Saints Sunday, it's important for us to pause to remember those who have gone on before us to the Church eternal. As we hear the story of Lazarus, we not only remember the lives of the saints, but we also remember anew that in Christ, they are victorious over death. While they don't step out of the tomb like Lazarus, we know that life springs eternal for them and for us. You see, not only are the saints who've gone on victorious, but so are we.

While Mary and Martha were searching for a sign in the face of their brother's death, Jesus broke into the scene speaking life as he called Lazarus forth from the tomb that day. When the scene spoke nothing but death to those around, when death's grip was so strong that it stunk up the tomb, Jesus called forth life again. When the situation spoke nothing but hopelessness for those gathered around the tomb, Jesus brought forth life anew.

Perhaps as we gather on this All Saints Sunday to remember our saints, we also come with hearts that are heavy with a world full of cares. Some come mourning loved ones and losses over the past year. Others carry a variety of burdens in their spirits. Throughout this week, many of you have joined in interfaith services of remembrance for the victims whose lives were lost in the shootings the other week at the Tree of Life congregation in Pittsburgh. The tragedy still weighs heavy in our hearts this day. Additionally, as we head to the polls this week for a mid-term election, the campaign rhetoric often seems to burn bridges rather than to build them among people. We live in a broken world where hurting people continue to hurt one another.

As the United Methodist Church faces a special session of the General Conference in February to help us find a way forward to remain united in our global ministry and mission in the face of different understandings of human sexuality, theology, and biblical witness, even the very body of Christ is not exempt from the brokenness that we experience in the world around us. We draw our lines in the sand. We close our ears to one another.

Could it be that this All Saints Sunday we weep not only at the tombs of those that we love, but also at the tombs of lost hopes and dashed dreams? In worship today, dare we approach the tombs in our world and in our lives that wreak of violence, harsh words, broken relationships, and bruised spirits? Could it be that even the Church finds itself inside a tomb when we serve a Risen Christ? Who will break the seal of these stone cold tombs? As Ezekiel once asked, "Can dry bones live again?"

Perhaps this morning, we, too, come searching for, praying earnestly for a sign, any sign that death is not the end, that violence is not the last word, that brokenness can be healed, and that together our spirits might be restored and we would find better ways to live in harmony, humility, and peace with one another.

And today as we search for those signs, Jesus comes into our midst to meet us just as he journeyed to Bethany some two thousand years ago. The same Jesus who stood at the tomb of his friend, Lazarus, stands at the tombs that bring us doubt and despair still today. His words are similar to what he offered Mary, Martha, and all those who wept over Lazarus. Surely he weeps with and for us even this day.

He comes to be with us this day in all of our brokenness and unbelief. And still he speaks into the tombs whose air holds the stench of all that seems to be rotten and decaying; he speaks into the tombs whose walls seem to trap us in dying ways; and Jesus calls us forth into the light of the day that he brings forth. Jesus invites us to step into life anew yet again as he did with Lazarus some two thousand years ago. He reminds us that death is not the last word, but life is available to those who believe, who trust, in Jesus Christ.

When Jesus called Lazarus from the tomb, he came out, bound up in the clothes of the grave. Jesus said to those gathered around, “Unbind him, and let him go.” He invited those gathered at the tomb to participate in the new life to which he had called Lazarus.

As Jesus stands at our tombs this morning and calls us forth to life, how might we remove the grave cloths so that those who are bound may be set free?

Surely it’s what we’ve done through the funds we raise for the United Methodist Committee on Relief as they bring hope to communities devastated by natural disasters. Surely, we unbind the grave cloths of those who mourn when we support one another with tears and shared memories. Surely, we unbind the grave cloths of our communities when we provide opportunities to live in relationship with one another despite our political and theological differences. Surely, we invite others to step into new life when we stand with those who are oppressed and hurting so that they might know they are not alone.

Sometimes when we find ourselves praying for a sign, we discover the One who invites us to be the sign, the sign of hope, the sign of love, the sign of new life in Jesus Christ. It’s what happens every time we gather around this sacred table. We receive the signs of Christ’s presence with us that we might be a sign of Christ’s presence for the world.

Wherever we find ourselves as the body of Christ, we bear witness to the One who speaks into the darkest corners of the stinkiest tombs, inviting others to life in Jesus Christ. When the world is looking for a sign of hope in the midst of despair, we bear witness to the presence of the One who brings life, life unbound, with grace abundant enough for the journey.