Talking to Dead People

John 11:32-44

INTRO:

“Saint, n. A dead sinner revised and edited.”
Ambrose Bierce 1911.

“The saints have no need of honor from us; neither does our devotion add even slightest thing to what is theirs. Clearly, if we venerate their memory, it serves us, not them. But I tell you, when I think of them, I find myself inflamed with tremendous yearning.”
Bernard of Clairvaus 1090-1153

Every Sunday is a chance to talk to the dead, not just on All Saints Day. Do you think that sounds morbid? Does it sounds strange? Remember I am talking about the way Christians think of those who have gone on before us in faith.

Every Sunday, including today, we take our cues from dead people. Today it’s the prophet Isaiah, John on Patmos, and the Gospel of John.

ME:

Once there was a pastor whose church was surrounded by a huge cemetery where members of the church had been buried for generations. He was visited by the family members of one of those buried in the cemetery. They asked his permission to bring in a professional “medium” whom they
wanted to hire to stand beside the grave of their relative and try to contact him. There were looking for his advice on various family financial matters.

The pastor would **NOT** give them permission because it was a Christian Church and we don’t believe in stuff like that. **What do you think? Was he right to turn them away?** We don’t believe in the use of mediums, and we don’t expect to receive advice from those buried in the cemetery, but in a way, we do communicate with the dead. I do find myself talking to my dad at times. Maybe the dead cannot hear us, I don’t really know and can only speculate.

**But we do believe that we can hear them.**

YOU:

**Do you ever talk to the dead? Do the dead ever talk to you?**

If you come to church, **and it looks like you do,** the answer to one of those questions is YES! Let’s watch as Jesus teaches us to talk to dead people:

**Let’s pray together first...**

GOD:

**John 11:31–44 (NRSV):**

> 31 When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” 32 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also
weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34 He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” 35 Jesus began to weep. 36 So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” 37 But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” 38 Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39 Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” 40 Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” 41 So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” 43 When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” 44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him

WE:

His response to this tragedy shows shows the human and the divine natures of Jesus. So far he had been perfectly calm, assuring Martha that her brother would rise and claiming that he was the resurrection and the life. Jesus was completely in command of the situation. He challenged Martha’s faith. But then Mary appeared. Crushed with sorrow and joined by the crowd of mourners. Jesus felt it. He was deeply moved and troubled. “Jesus wept.” He was deeply moved literally means “to snort like a
“Troubled” means agitation or confusion. Here it implies agitation. Jesus was not apathetic to their sorrow. Lazarus had been a close friend, and Jesus shared in feeling grief over his death. His human feelings were normal and are revealed by the crisis of the moment. Overcome by emotion, “Jesus burst into tears.”

The people at Lazarus’s tomb were impressed by Jesus’ display of emotion and took it as a sign of his love for Lazarus. Others questioned why Jesus had not prevented Lazarus’s death by one of his miracles.

The repeating of “deeply moved” shows that Jesus was still under the emotional tension that his first contact with the mourners had produced. He would keep his promise to Martha that her brother should rise again. The burial place was a cave in limestone rock and closed by a stone laid over the entrance. Sounds somewhat familiar, doesn’t it?

Having challenged Martha’s faith, Jesus now faces his own challenge. He ordered the stone to be rolled away. Martha’s protest was understandable. It would seem like a bad idea to uncover a decaying corpse.

*She had to put faith in Jesus.*
The raising of Lazarus was no problem for Jesus. The real problem was removing the uncertainty from Martha’s attitude that the glory of God could be revealed to her and everyone present.

When Martha met his condition, the last step of faith she could take, Jesus took the next step. He didn’t ask God to raise Lazarus; he thanked him for having already answered. So great was Jesus’ faith in the Father that he assumed this miracle that was necessary to his mission to be as good as done. Only raising Lazarus would complete the expectations Jesus had inspired in the disciples and in Mary and Martha. He said in his prayer that the transaction was already complete, but he asked for the raising of Lazarus as a sign to the people that he had been sent by the Father.

Having prayed this prayer, Jesus spoke to the dead man. Jesus had said on a previous occasion that a time would come when all who were in their graves would hear his voice. This preview was a single demonstration of that authority. The words spoken were brief, direct and can be paraphrased, “Lazarus! This way out!” It is as if Jesus were directing someone lost in a gloomy dungeon.

*The creative power of God reversed the process of corruption and revived the corpse to life.*

The effect was startling. The dead man appeared at the entrance to the tomb, still bound by the grave-clothes wrapped around him. Jesus ordered that he be released from the wrappings and returned to a normal life. It
was a supreme demonstration of the power of eternal life that triumphed over death and hopelessness.

In our world, the dead remain dead. We come to a dead end. **What can we do?**

**Give up and accept our fate? No!** Here comes John and his Gospel and Mary and Martha to tell the story of Lazarus and how Jesus brought him back to life! Jesus has come into the world and things are no longer fixed as they once were. Sometimes there is a way . . . when there seems to be no way. Sometimes, even in November, Jesus can make it seem **like Easter!**

**THE SERMON IN A SENTENCE:**

*God can make a way even when there seems to be no way.*

**YOU:**

How will you have hope even when there is no hope? **Where do you need God to make a way in your life?**

**CLOSE:**

We gather on Sundays, we open our Bibles, we sing songs created before we were alive. On this Sunday, let’s speak about our need to be receivers. We are the kind of people who are willing to **listen,** to **receive** what they
saints have to teach us, to have our own attempts at discipleship evaluated by their example.

The saints — those blessed dead who have gone before us — will graciously show us the way.

Laurence Hull Stokes reminds us that:

*Heaven is not only about the future, but also about the past and the present. It is a means of connecting Christians now alive with all who went before them. Whatever else eternal life is, it is ‘the communion if saints’ — the bond of grace between all Christians living and dead. The loss of the concept of heaven is also the loss of a companionship we rightly feel with all who have preceded us in the faith.*

Let’s not lose this connection. Let’s thank thank God for this and for them now in prayer . . .