

**Kirk of St James**  
**Sunday November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018**  
**Sermon “Merely Interrupted”**  
**Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton**

Around the world and throughout the centuries one of the most unique aspects of different cultures and time periods is how people have dealt with death. In the ancient world it was not uncommon for people to have two burials. The first time a body would be buried in a shallow grave or tomb and left for a period. After the required amount of time passed the bones would be dug up and placed in an ossuary (a special box, chest etc.) and then put into a tomb or other space. This practice explains a troubling passage in Matthew 8:21 that people often find problematic. It happens when a young man approaches Jesus and asks to follow him but before he can follow Jesus he must first go home and bury his father to which Jesus replies "let the dead bury their own dead." At first this passage sounds cruel on Jesus' behalf but, this statement most likely references the second burial of bones. Believe it or not the world's largest ossuary can be found in the catacombs of France where over six million people are buried. One of the best-known ancient methods of burial comes from the Egyptians whose elaborate customs are well known and studied around the globe.

Even in our modern world vastly different practices are employed. While in South East Asia long lines of mourners singing, wailing, and even sometimes painted can be seen snaking through city streets. In one remote area where I stayed the former head-hunting tribe had bone houses filled with bones that were said to shriek and moan until Christian missionaries came. Once they prayed the noises stopped. All over the world there are different practices and customs. At first it appears that today's passage in John is about a burial however, once Jesus intervenes it becomes something much more. It is a sign that points to the Messiah and what is to come. It is a sign of hope in a hopeless situation and it is a moment where the love of Christ meets headfirst with humanity.

On this All Saints Day it is an appropriate passage to explore. On this day "the church turns its attention to the deceased saints of her past, men and women whose lives bear witness

to a hope rooted in the gospel that proclaims God's victory over death." Here we have our human understanding of death meet the holy understanding of death. Theologian N.T Wright says that there are two kinds of grief, a hopeless grief and a hopeful grief." Just be clear hopeful grief is still grief. It can still be very, very bitter yet at its heart is not total despair. Hopeful grief is what our passage today is all about. What can the raising of Lazarus on this All Saints Sunday say to us today?

The first thing we are confronted with in this passage is the human side of this tragedy. When Mary first catches sight of Jesus she does what many of us have likely done--assigned some of the blame directly at the feet of Jesus. She does not say hello, she does not let him sit down for a moment, she simply states "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Mary as usual is honest and straight forward. As the conversation progresses Jesus comes to the tomb and orders the stone rolled away. Practical, detail-oriented Martha is thinking ahead and has some very distinct thoughts on this request. The first is that she specifies Lazarus has been dead for four days. In the ancient world many believed the soul of a person stayed with the body for three days. By the fourth the soul had departed and there was literally no hope. Since the fourth day has rolled around there is nothing left to hope for. Martha also points out in her matter of fact way that the only thing coming out of that tomb now will be the smell if they open it.

Faced with the grief-stricken Mary looking for answers at a heart level and a practical Martha who is dealing with things on a head level there is a lot going on. This makes sense, we all process grief differently. For Jesus faced with the grief-stricken sisters and crowd, and for his own grief over the loss of a friend Jesus begins to weep. Believe it or not there is some debate over why Jesus weeps in this passage. Some argue that Jesus weeping here is simply an outgrowth of his humanity and is in no way related to his divinity. These people take a dualistic approach to Jesus keeping his human nature and divine distinctly divided. Others suggest that Jesus is not weeping over Lazarus at all but, rather is upset because even when faced with the Messiah people do not recognize him as God's Son. He is weeping over their blindness and

inability to understand what he has been trying to teach them. John Chrysostom an early church father argued that Jesus was simply trying to arouse sympathy in the crowd and play on their emotions.

To be honest I had not even heard of some of these theories before, and in some ways, I find it puzzling that people throughout history are so uncomfortable with the fact that Jesus showed emotion they feel they must explain it away. If Jesus is the word made flesh and truly human, it makes sense he would feel the same things we feel. There is a fourth interpretation of this passage I feel touches the truth of this account. As one scholar said "The God of the church, embodied in the triune relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit, is not unaffected by the suffering and loss of the world. Jesus looks upon the grieving of Mary, Martha, and the Jews with compassion and empathy. In his weeping, Christ is not bowing to human nature, nor is he pained by the failure of the mourners to understand the nature of death. Jesus weeps for the death of Lazarus and for the pain of those who loved him. The good news of this text is that in Christ God freely enters into this suffering." We are loved by a God who loves us so much that he weeps with us.

Suddenly this story is not about a death, a burial, or even grief. This passage is about the life-giving promises of God who loves us and who promises that "whoever lives and believes in me will never die." The witnesses that day and us as readers today are invited into that mystery and that hope. We are invited into life and that is where N.T Wrights hopeful grief becomes reality. One writer had a wonderful line where he said, "Death still affects those who turn to Jesus in faith, as it affected Lazarus and Jesus himself; but John deploys this story to show that even though disciples may still die, death does not end, but interrupts their life." I really like that description--interrupted but not ended.

It is why we can celebrate All Saints Day with both hope and joy. As we remember all those saints in our lives who had an impact on us and our faith. We remember all those who have gone ahead of us and we know that we will see them again someday. These saints included Mary and Martha, Paul and the disciples, and countless others in the Bible who bore

witness to the love and glory of God. We touched on this a few weeks ago on our anniversary Sunday the number of things around us in this building that were given in love and memory of someone who has gone before us. Some people don't like plaques and things that are dedicated, they say it can make a church more like a mausoleum, and I hear what they are saying. But, for me I love them. These railings for example, were donated in memory of someone who was loved, who had an impact on people's lives. We never get anywhere on our own, we stand on the shoulders of our friends and family and community. It echoes the words of the hymn "you in your small corner and I in mine." Together when we put our light together we shine like the sun, like a light on a hill.

A few examples from our own congregation can be seen around our church. If you ever go out the back entrance onto Fitzroy and look up, that stained-glass window was placed in honour of someone who worked as an officer of this church for fifty years. Three of the windows over here on the Fitzroy side remember those who gave their lives in the Second World War. Here behind me is St James the patron of our congregation placed in memory of Rev. John and Euphemia Goodwill. They served as missionaries in Espiritu Santu in the New Hebrides. These are just some of our saints. There are countless others who have filled our lives and these pews over the years.

So today we give thanks for those who have gone before and were witnesses to us of faith and discipleship. We go knowing that death has no power over our days and that we belong to God in both life and death and nothing separates us from that reality. I pray that we continue to be the light to show others the way to Christ, that they too may know his joy and peace.