

Revelation 21: 1-6a

John 11: 32-44

We live in a world where we often question why things happen. We interrogate causes and effects. If I had been there then there is no way that terrible thing would have happen, or, if only knew I could have prevented that tragedy from happening. In a world that seems like control is never obtainable, we often play that “what if” game, frequently leading ourselves down a sort of rabbit trail that has no end.

The poet Shel Silverstein in his poem *Whatif* shares the complications of our minds in the midst of the unknown:

*Last night, while I lay thinking here,
Some Whatifs crawled inside my ear
And pranced and partied all night long
And sang their same old Whatif song:
Whatif I'm dumb in school?
Whatif they've closed the swimming pool?
Whatif I get beat up?
Whatif there's poison in my cup?
Whatif I start to cry?
Whatif I get sick and die?*

The poem continues but these are the anxieties we live with. The Whatif's are very much still with us, aren't they?

In this time of Covid we long to be done. Done with Covid, done with the uncertainty, done with the constant changes and adaptations. We are tired of pivoting. We question how or if this pandemic will ever end. We often hypothesize if everyone gets vaccinated then maybe we can get back to normality, but the reality is that we don't know. We have variant strains that threaten our hopes, we have misinformation running rampant. We see school closings, face mask and social distancing requirements. We struggle to find a sense of peace amongst so much uncertainty. We search for shalom, yet we seem to only find chaos.

On this day we memorialize those saints who have departed from their earthly vessels. Longing for just one more hug, one more talk, one more glimpse with our natural eye. Yet we are enlivened with the hope of the

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resurrection that one day we will once again be reunited. That in that reunion there will be no more separation, no more pain, no more suffering, that old way of things will be passed, and the new way of flourishing will be all encompassing. This is our great hope. Yet it still seems too hard to fully grasp something that is encased in so much mystery.

I believe the great song writer Sam Cooke in his song, “*A Change is Gonna Come*” encompasses this real feeling that is in each of us.

He sings,

*It's been too hard living
But I'm afraid to die
'Cause I don't know what's up there
Beyond the sky*

*It's been a long
A long time coming
But I know a change gonna come
Oh, yes it will*

On this side of eternity, we stand in the unknown, the hope, yet the mystery of the things to come. Amongst everything going on in our lives, we encounter this very curious text. We encounter Jesus being informed that his friend Lazarus was sick. Yet there is no urgency in Jesus to attend to his friend. Jesus declares in the text that this illness will not lead to death, but rather it is for the Glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it. So, Jesus stays in that place for two more days completing all that he needs to.

When he is finally ready to go to Lazarus, Jesus says to the disciples “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep but I am going to wake him up.” The disciples questioned the statement, and Jesus declares that Lazarus is in fact dead. I imagine the disciples were wondering why then are we going? They had seen Jesus do many great works, and raising someone from the dead was not one of them. Yet Jesus then tells them that he was glad not to be present to heal Lazarus. He declares to them that they are going to see the Glory of God like they had never seen it before.

Upon their arrival, Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

I find the four-day time line quite curious. Investigating this passage, we recognize that Lazarus was in Bethany which about a day's journey from where Jesus was. So, shortly after the messengers left to bring word to Jesus about Lazarus' sickness, Lazarus is overcome by sickness and dies. Jesus receives news of Lazarus' sickness and remains in that place for two days. But before Jesus even got news of his sickness, Lazarus is dead. They then head to Bethany where Lazarus is located, which is another day's journey. This is why we see this four-day passage of time.

According to Jewish belief, the soul of a departed person hung around the body for three days after its death. The soul would depart after three days and the body would start decaying. So, if the raising of Lazarus would have happened within those first three days the people might have claimed that there was no miracle involved, as the spirit had simply returned to the body within the preconceived time. Yet Jesus, by performing the resurrection on the fourth day, demonstrated that He had dominion over death itself, that even a person whose body had begun to decompose could be brought back to life.

When we enter back into the narrative, we see Jesus' arrival in Bethany. There was sadness in the air the beloved Lazarus was gone. His sisters Martha and Mary were distraught, they were angry, they were frustrated. They had sent word for Jesus to come, and yet he did not arrive before their brother was overcome by his infirmity. Jesus assures Martha that Lazarus will indeed rise again, and Martha says, "Yes Rabbi, I know he will rise again in the resurrection." But Jesus states, "*those who believe in me even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.*"

I imagine Martha in that moment distraught, lost, confused, and saddened by her brother's death, and looking at Jesus who, "by the way seems to be late", and now is speaking in riddles. Yet Martha declares that she believes that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. She then goes to Mary and tells her that Jesus wants to see her. Mary quickly goes to meet Jesus! She also is filled with sadness, grief, and weeping, and like her sister, tells Jesus that had he been present her brother would still be alive. In that moment Jesus is deeply moved, asking where the body of his dear friend had been laid.

Jesus arrives at the tomb and the pain of the moment is authentic. Jesus joins that space with those who mourn: the lost, hurt and pain of the moment are real and raw, and Jesus begins to weep.

My friends, I believe that this is an invitation. We are allowed to mourn, we are allowed to be sad, we are allowed to be angry, we are allowed to enter into grief. It will not be too much; we will not be overcome or overwhelmed by it so long as we lean on God.

And have hope and faith, asking God to help us with our unbelief.

After that moment Jesus tells those around to remove the stone which allowed for the dead to rest undisturbed, until they would later come to collect their bones. Martha insists that would be a bad idea because the body had begun to decay and the smell would not be pleasant.

Jesus then states, “If you believe you will see Glory of God!” And he declared for “Lazarus to Arise” from his slumber, and Lazarus comes forth. The people are astonished and the glory of God is revealed to all those present.

This resurrection story of Lazarus is but a glimpse of the resurrection that we all hope to participate in on that glorious day of the Lord! However, as we reflect on the story of Lazarus, we realize that this story is not our story! Many of us, like Mary and Martha, are filled with pain, loss, sorrow and mourning of our loved ones! We struggle to have a belief in the resurrection! We live in places and spaces where the idea of resurrection and eternal bliss seems far off! The idea that we will one day live into God’s promises of Resurrection and Restoration seems like a fairytale!

I have heard many people ask if all the miracles found in the Scripture are real! Was Jonah really in the belly of the whale for three days? Did Moses part the Red Sea? Did Jesus walk on water? Did Jesus really feed 5,000 with the five loaves of bread and two fish? I am not an eye witness to any of these particular miracles. However, I do have a great faith in the power and the majesty of God.

But as we mourn, as we grieve, as we celebrate, and as we commemorate the lives of the past saints, there is hope in resurrection. A hope that all things will be restored and made new! The divine acts of resurrection and restoration grants us hope in our darkest hour. When it seems like we don’t have enough faith or hope to push forward. When tragedy strikes once again. When we realize that we have no real control in this world. When we question, why? And when we question: What if?

Theologian Frederick Buechner speaks of the meaning of the resurrection, stating: “The Resurrection means that the worst thing is never the last thing.”

The resurrection of Lazarus is a glorious miracle. Yet our resurrection hope is in Jesus. The scripture highlights that since Jesus was resurrected, that we too in a like manner will be resurrected into new life! The resurrection is the hope that one day all things will be restored to shalom, that we will be resurrected, released from our limited earthen vessels, and be reunited with God. This my friends, is the Good News, even amidst all the uncertainty, all the confusion, all the loss, all the pain.

The Apostle John on the Island of Patmos had a vision of what is to come, and declares this vision very clearly... (Revelation 21:1-4)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals.



Lazarus, Arise

November 7, 2021

All Saints Sunday

The Reverend Matthew J. Warfield

He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.

To the Glory of God!

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