

**November 1, 2015 - All Saints' Day**  
**John 11:[1-31] 32-44**  
**The Rev. Carenda Baker**

Some wise soul has suggested that there are only two things in life of which we can be certain: death and taxes. At face value, that statement is pretty much on the mark. It surely cuts to the chase! But there is a much deeper level where our hearts and spirits, where our imaginations and wills dwell - that part of us which seeks meaning and purpose, beauty, truth, compassion, and character. We need something substantial that will sustain and honor the mystery and rich complexity of human life and God's dream for us. What we need is a narrative. We need a good story. We enter just such a powerful, transformative story today in the gospel of John.

Some dear friends of Jesus, with whom he has on numerous occasions enjoyed dinner and laughter, deep conversation and caring companionship – these friends, two sisters named Martha and Mary and their brother Lazarus are in the midst of a family crisis. Lazarus has become very ill. So the sisters send word to Jesus: “Your dear friend, our brother Lazarus is gravely ill. Won’t you please come?” Jesus gets the word and decides to stay 2 days longer where he has been with the disciples. Imagine how disappointing that must have been, when their dear friend didn’t come at the point when they were most clearly in crisis and needed love and support and healing power. For whatever reason which remains unknown to Mary and Martha, and not at all understood by his disciples, Jesus does not go. And in the meantime Lazarus dies.

Two days later, Jesus decides it is time to move on, but not forward to a place to meet new seekers of truth, as the disciples expect. No - we’re going back to Judea, Jesus says. And the disciples nervously look at each other. “Really, Lord? Are you sure? They tried to stone you back there! What possible good can come from going back there where people are antagonistic and don’t like what you have been saying and doing? They want to be rid of you!” Jesus says – we’ve got to go back. Lazarus has died.

In the meantime, the grieving sisters and their friends have laid Lazarus’s body in the tomb of a cave, and rolled a stone in front of it. With no embalming in those days, burial had to happen quickly after death. So they have now entered into that period appointed for grief and mourning following a death in the community.

By the time Jesus and the disciples arrive, Lazarus has been in the tomb four days. The sisters learn that Jesus is on his way to see them. Martha runs on ahead to meet Jesus on his way to their house. Now Martha loves Jesus, and she lays out her burdened and grieving heart to him. “Lord, if only you had been here, Lazarus would not be in that tomb now. But you are powerful, and I know God will give you whatever you ask him for.” We know Martha’s heart well, don’t we - the place of “if only” and trying to bargain with God. The worst has already happened: the serious diagnosis and prognosis given, the marriage is pronounced over, the secure job has been eliminated.

But maybe there's a slim chance of beating this thing somehow, this enemy, death, in whatever form it comes.

"You know", says Jesus to Martha, "Lazarus will rise again", and Martha says, "Yes, I know that, at the end of time he will be raised". Can you imagine Martha wondering: "That's all well and good, Lord, but it's precious little comfort to me right now, when my brother is dead and gone and lies in that grave. And then Jesus says: *"I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE. THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN ME, EVEN THOUGH THEY DIE WILL LIVE, AND EVERYONE WHO BELIEVES IN ME WILL NEVER DIE. DO YOU BELIEVE THIS?"* And there the question hangs for Martha. It is the question that has been asked for over 2,000 years – asked of all those who have lived before us. It is the question posed to each of us, and it is a question that will continue to be asked of those yet to be born who will come after us.

Do you believe this? - says Jesus. Not do you understand this, or can you make rational sense of this, but do you believe this - that I am the Resurrection and the Life, the promised way to never ending life? Beginning with Martha and across the span of centuries, with courage and faith in hand, on a wing and a prayer, some have answered boldly, "Yes, I believe this". Some others have said "I really want to believe this, but I'm not sure I do". And still others have said "I just can't believe this thing you can't prove". Our Episcopal burial service begins with these very words: "I am Resurrection and I am Life, says the Lord. Whoever has faith in me shall have life, even though he die." There is no more powerful or hopeful way to speak God's truth in the face of death than these words of Jesus.

If you have ever wondered what business God is really in, it is this, and it is the mother of all missions: God is in the business of raising the dead to life. Death is arch enemy #1. It is that stark unpleasant reality we do all in our power to avoid thinking about, talking about, and preparing for. It hurts. It separates. It shakes us to our core leaving us feeling lost and helpless. It rearranges our life in ways we never imagined or asked for. But there is comfort for us in the fact that Jesus was human and wept in the face of death. He knew grief and pain, and was cut to the heart like we are. Jesus wept with those who loved Lazarus, and he may have wept in anticipatory grief for himself, because what was about to be set in motion for him was his own death and burial, coming as a result of the miracle he is about to do for Lazarus. Jesus joins the grieving ones in the midst of their mourning, meets them in their tears of confusion, lostness, in their fear, doubt, disbelief and despair. Jesus meets those mourners of dead Lazarus outside the tomb and with defiant boldness in the face of death and fierce determination in his voice says, "Roll that stone away." And then looking upward he cries, "Lazarus, come out!"

And in a moment, out staggers Lazarus, still wearing the grave clothes that had been wrapped around his body and face when he was laid in the tomb four days ago. "Unbind him, and let him go", says Jesus to those looking on.

Now I hope you know Jesus' words have not been frozen in time and were meant only for Lazarus. Have you ever really heard these words? And if you've heard them, how

have you let them sink into your mind and heart and spirit to transform you? “Come out. Unbind him and let him go. Unbind her and let her go”. These living words contain God’s power, and they are intended for each of us personally, and for Trinity and every other Christian faith community. Come out from your places of death. Come out, and be unbound. Come out from despair and hopelessness. Come out and be unbound from the wounds of broken relationships. Come out from the pain of betrayal by those you trusted. Come out and be unbound from fear of scarcity and “not having enough” or “being enough”. Come out and be unbound from bitterness and resentment. Come out from the fear of your own physical decline and dying, and the decline and death of those dearest to you. Come out and be unbound from pride and stubborn self-reliance, insisting that life unfold in ways you can manage on your own. Come out and be unbound from the belief that you can’t make a difference in this world because it is overrun with suffering, evil, injustice, and death. “Dear ones, come out”, Jesus cries. Come out into my light and live!

Other world religions teach belief in a particular path of faith. Other religious traditions command its followers to love. But the Christian faith is unique because it offers the hope of eternal life, hope that springs forth from the very places of death, hope that can rest secure because we follow a death-defying God, a God whose primary business is raising the dead to life, here and now. We know death all too well. But we are invited to reach out in sure and certain hope for life and life eternal, that larger life we will enter after our physical life ends, where we will join that great cloud of witnesses, the communion of saints, praising God, and at home in God’s heart of love forever. Lest we mistakenly think that this good news, this gospel truth of a death-defying, bondage breaking, life-giving God can only be grasped by adults, let me share with you the story of Philip and his Sunday school class.

Philip was an 8 year-old boy born with Down’s syndrome. He was a pleasant and happy boy, but growing increasingly aware of the difference between himself and other children. Philip attended a Methodist Sunday school, along with nine other 8 year-old boys and girls. Now Philip with his differences was not readily accepted by this 3<sup>rd</sup> grade Sunday school class. But the teacher was sensitive and worked hard to help the other children become more understanding about Philip’s differences. The class enjoyed learning, laughing and playing together, and they got along well. But the teacher knew that Philip was not really part of that group. Philip didn’t choose or want to be different. He just was.

The Sunday after Easter that year the teacher decided to do something a bit more creative than usual and brought in ten of those old plastic “L’Eggs” eggs that pantyhose used to be sold in. It was a beautiful spring day and he gave the children directions to go outside and find some symbol of new life, put it in the plastic egg container, and bring it back so they could open and look at them together. Well, you know 8 year-olds left to run loose outside. It was glorious. And it was wild chaos. They ran around and gathered up their signs of new life and brought them back to the classroom for everyone to see. They opened each of those pantyhose egg containers one by one. The teacher opened the first egg which contained a flower and

the children "ooh'ed" and "aah'ed" over it. The next one had an actual live butterfly in it. "It's beautiful", the girls said, and well, 8 year-old boys rarely say "it's beautiful" about much of anything! The next egg contained a rock. Some of the kids laughed and said, "That's crazy. How is a rock supposed to be like new life?" The little boy whose egg they were talking about spoke up and said, "That's mine. I knew everybody would get flowers, and buds, and leaves and butterflies and stuff like that. So I got a rock because I wanted to be different, and for me that's new life."

The next container the teacher opened was empty. And as 8 year-olds will do, they raised their voices in protest, "Hey, that's not fair! Somebody didn't do it right!" The teacher felt a tug on his shirt sleeve, and he looked down and saw Philip standing there. "It's mine", Philip said. "It's mine". And the children started to complain, "You don't ever do things right, Philip. There's nothing there." "I did so do it," said Philip. "I did do it. It's empty – the tomb is empty!"

The class was silent for quite some time. And though you may not believe in miracles, the teacher said one happened that spring. From that time on it was different. Philip suddenly became a part of that group of 8 year-old children. They took him in. He entered. He was set free from the tomb of his differentness.

Later on that summer Philip died. His family had known from the time he was born that he would not live out a full life span. Many other things had been wrong with his tiny little body. So, when he got an infection that most children could have quickly shrugged off, Philip died.

He was buried from that church. And on that day at that funeral, nine 8 year-olds and their Sunday school teacher marched right up to that altar and laid on it an empty egg, an empty, old discarded holder of pantyhose.

"I am Resurrection and I am Life", says the Lord. Friends, it is my prayer that each of us will go and live like we believe this. Take that death-defying love of God with you into the world to share. It will bring hope, and it will raise you and those to whom you offer it to new life. Alleluia. AMEN.



