

The appointed texts for this All Saints Sunday are also some of the recommended texts for our funeral services, which is appropriate because today we take the time to grieve together as a worshipping community, only for a group of our deceased loved ones instead of for one person at a time. This year that grief seems especially heavy, because along with the death of members of this congregation, our extended families, friends, and coworkers, the pandemic has painted a grim background behind almost every area of our lives, calling us to make daily changes and choices in an effort to manage the risk of deadly disease. Constantly facing the prospect of early mortality has not been easy for our society. Our culture works hard to deny death; this is why we have multi-billion dollar industries not just to help us *feel* young and vibrant, but even just to help us *look* younger, so we can think less about the inevitable future to which our naturally greying hair and wrinkling skin point. Although the mortality rate is still 100%, death often seems to take us by surprise, even when someone has been seriously ill or outlived the actuaries' best guesses. Every once in a while, usually in the course of discussing funeral plans or burial versus cremation, I hear someone say, "Well, if I die..." and I think—though I do not usually say, "If? Don't you mean when?"

You might think that we would be better about this in the church, where Luther says that as theologians of the cross we should call a thing what it is, but sometimes we're not much better than the world around us. Although it's a big part of my job to proclaim the resurrection, and resurrection only happens on the other side of death, I often feel uncomfortable speaking plainly about someone dying, as though I'm being insensitive if I name death out loud instead of using the euphemisms we prefer: *passing away* or, as we Christians are fond of saying, *joining the church triumphant*. *Death* should not be a taboo word for Christians because we are the people of the empty tomb; our whole belief system is organized around the claim that even death is not the end of the story. But this is where the church also gets it wrong sometimes: when we are so focused on life after death, or on death as just a gateway to eternal life, or only on the promises that God will fulfill in the future, we are, in our own way, denying death as well, skipping over the reality of grief, loss, and suffering so we can think about heaven

instead. But when we are mired in grief, we know that doesn't work. We know what it is like to trust the promise of the resurrection but to still say with Mary, "Lord, if you had been here, my loved one would not have died."

And that grief, more than the promise of life after death, is really what today's gospel is about. This section in your bible is probably titled *The Raising of Lazarus*, but that part of the story only gets two brief verses at the end; most of this passage is about Jesus walking with Mary, Martha, and the crowd in their grief and about Jesus himself grieving the death of his friend. Jesus certainly believes in resurrection; he has told his disciples that the reason they are going to Bethany is so he can awaken Lazarus again. Yet even though Jesus knows how this story is going to end, still we read that he weeps, because, as the crowd points out, he loved his friend who had died, and he empathizes with all those who are mourning Lazarus' death. This story is not just about, nor even mainly about, Jesus raising Lazarus. If it's just about that, then we have to wonder why we should take either instruction or comfort from this passage, since Jesus isn't in the habit these days of resurrecting the dead and returning them to this life a few days after we bury them. Instead, John shows us that Jesus cares not just about resurrected life but about this life and the pain, loss, grief, and suffering that are part of our human experience. Our God knows what it's like to grieve and grieves along with us.

Especially on All Saints day, but also any time we gather as the church, and especially any time we come to the table for our little foretaste of the feast around which the saints of heaven are already gathered, we boldly proclaim our confidence in the promise God has made of life that extends beyond what we can now see. And when the time comes to commend one of our loved ones to the eternal care of the One who created them, we can find some comfort that their story isn't over. But the incarnated God who stood outside Lazarus' tomb and wept is both the God of heaven and the God of earth. So today, we celebrate not only the promise that God has fulfilled for those saints who have gone before us; we give thanks for God's faithfulness to us, now: that while we are still here living, facing death—our own death or the death of those we love—and mourning and crying and pain are still inescapable parts of life, we know we never suffer alone. God promises to one day wipe every tear from every eye, but in the mean time, when we weep, God weeps with us.