

Today is all Saints Sunday; and of course, we don't worship the Saints, we worship our Triune God who makes us Saints.

And this morning we've remembered the saints that have gone before us this past year, the new saints that God has claimed through baptism, and all the saints throughout history and around the world. There is indeed a great cloud of witnesses.

This year, our gospel readings have primarily focused on Mark with some additional readings from John. One of the central refrains we hear in the gospel of Mark is about the kingdom of God. One of the central refrains in John is about eternal life.

In the ninth chapter we have a wonderful story of a man who is born blind, Jesus heals him and the story sets up this whole metaphor relating sight with insight about God. The religious people insist they aren't blind.

And Jesus turns the tables on them; essentially, he was saying to the religious people, that the way they were seeing God, was exactly their blindness. And in truth, they were seeing God through the lens of the law... And ultimately it was judgmental; it was punitive and destructive.

In other words, the religious people applied the law in such a way that it created insiders and outsiders. And for those on the outside as well as those on the inside it was a kind of spiritual death.

In our reading for today, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. In and through Jesus, death itself is transformed into life. And Lazarus is not only dead, he's been dead for four days. I grew up on a farm, I know what dead for four days smells like, I trust you do too! That's deader than a doornail!

Jesus raises Lazarus not only from the dead, but from a death so profoundly beyond imagination, it is miraculous on so many levels.

Philosopher Martin Heidegger talked about humanity Being-Toward-Death; essentially the idea that death is our universal and existential predicament. That to some degree we tend to dwell on it; we can become preoccupied with it. And it can literally cripple us, living like deer in the headlights.

When we are afraid, everything looks scary. When we become fearful, we start seeing all kinds of reasons to be frightened. And when we indulge that fear, we diminish our capacity to hope and live our lives to the fullest. Sometimes, fear becomes a way of seeing the world.

There is an old phrase that says “seeing is believing.” And our gospel lesson is very clear that the people who witnessed Lazarus coming out of the tomb came to believe that in the teaching and ministry of Jesus, God had the power to transform death into life. Jesus is always about transforming death, transforming our fears into life and grace.

I have to be honest with you, on one hand, this is a story that is hard for me to believe-- I wasn't there, I didn't see it. And yet on the other hand, I have come to believe. You see, there is truth in this story... And honestly, seeing is believing...

Quick story... Many years ago while we were in college, Kris and I worked in a group home as weekend house parents. It was a great job; we had a place to live, the pay allowed us to continue college, we got to work together and we made a lot of “life-long” friends.

There were six adolescents that lived in the group home and during one particular stretch; it seemed that every single one of them was acting out in harmful ways. Lots of fighting... It felt like everyone was walking on egg shells, any little issue became a big deal. And it seemed to be escalating. Everything we tried to do as a staff just seemed to make matters worse.

Finally, a psychologist was called in to consult with us. We told him about all the problems, all the things we had tried; we told him about our despair, we just couldn't understand why these kids were acting so violently.

The psychologist was a wise person, he instructed us to have a jar full of pennies, and he told us we were to give a penny for any behavior that was even remotely nice. Our task was to simply to give away all the pennies. I thought it was dumb idea. But we did it... If someone said “good morning” we’d give them a penny. If someone smiled, we’d give them a penny. If someone was even remotely kind, we’d give them a penny. It seemed ridiculous...

But an amazing thing started to happen. Slowly, the kids became more courteous, they started sharing and working together. After just a couple weeks it was an amazing transformation.

The psychologist came back to do some reflecting with us. We were excited to tell him about the change. He then invited us to stop giving away pennies, and instead to give the person a “pat on the back.” We were to imagine having a jar full of “pats on the back” and our job was to give them all away. Again, I thought this was crazy.

I thought everything would go back to the violent ways of the past. But it didn’t. The kids continued to be courteous, sharing and working together.

When I think about that story today, I realize, it was not as much about the kids that changed, as much as it was about the staff that changed. He gave us a different way to see the kids. Instead of seeing all the bad things, his little experiment taught us how to see the good things. We just had become blind to see them. Isn’t that amazing...

In our gospel lesson, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead... his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Lazarus was literally bound by death. And Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.” Take off all those trappings of death and let’s get on with some of that eternal life...

As Christians, we are fundamentally people of resurrection and this is a completely different way of seeing the world. It is a lens that transforms fear into faith. And just as surely as Lazarus is raised from the dead, we also experience resurrection in our lives all the time...

It's in the love we have for one another. It's in the graciousness we extend to one another. It's in the forgiveness we extend to one another; in the reconciliation of broken relationships. It's in the wholeness of those who are sick and the hopefulness of those who are dying. It's in the faith of all the Saints who have gone before us.

It's in all the ways we connect, support and include one another. It's in the generosity of opening our hearts to share with one another. It's in all the ministries of this church... All these things give witness to resurrection and the Kingdom of God. All these things are gifts and blessings and they shower down upon us all the time.

Have you seen these things? This is a new lens for seeing the world. We are not people of death; we are people of resurrection... This is a new kind of eternal life breaking into reality. And by noticing these things, we insist that the Kingdom comes here on earth as it is in heaven.

As Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Life is snatched out of the power of death.

The good news this morning is that indeed our physical bodies will one day pass away, but we are people who believe that Jesus has conquered death. And just as he raised Lazarus from the dead; he raises our faith, our hopes and dreams, and our love.

And frankly, I've seen it and I believe it. How do you see the world? How does resurrection change your life?

Amen.