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Lazarus Laughed¹

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Text: John 11:32-44, All Saints Sunday

Each time we gather to celebrate Holy Communion the presiding minister concludes the Preface, at the beginning of the Great Thanksgiving, with these words: “And so with the choirs of angels, and with all the faithful of every time and place, we praise your name and join their hymn of unending praise”; whereupon we sing the *Sanctus*, the “Holy, Holy, Holy.” That continuing union with the great company of saints who have gone before us is much on our minds as we gather in worship on this All Saints Sunday. It is as if we are standing on the threshold between time and eternity, unable to see what lies in the gloom ahead, but hearing the faint echo of what seems the song of a great and mighty chorus.

What do you suppose it would be like, if we were to lose our fear of death? By that I mean, what if that dark at the end of the tunnel that awaits every one of us, ceased to be something we dreaded and was viewed, instead, like a portal, the beginning of a new adventure?

I got a glimpse into an answer to that question several months ago when I stumbled upon a little known play by Eugene O’Neill entitled, “Lazarus Laughed.”² Apparently, the play was never a commercial success. In fact, after opening on Broadway — many years ago — it closed after one week. However, as I read it I was deeply moved, because I believe O’Neill has put his finger on something that relates closely to our celebration of this All Saints Day.

The play begins where the biblical story, which we heard in today’s Gospel, concludes. Jesus has just called his friend Lazarus back from the dead. Lazarus, you will recall, had been buried for four days before Jesus arrived in the village of Bethany, ordered the stone to be rolled back from the tomb, and restored him to life. As the curtain goes up, Lazarus is seen stumbling out of the dark, blinking into the sunlight. And after the grave clothes are taken off him he

begins to laugh: a soft, gentle laugh. Nothing bitter, nothing derisive, but an embracing, astonishing, welcoming sound. The very first thing he does is to embrace Jesus with gratitude. Then he begins to embrace his sisters and the other people gathered there.

He has a very clear look in his eye, as if he is seeing the world about him for the very first time. He reaches over and pats the earth very affectionately. He looks up at the sky, at the trees, at his neighbours, as if he has never seen them before, as if he is overwhelmed by the incredible all-rightness of the way everything is. The very first words he utters are the words, "Yes, yes, yes," as if to embrace reality as it is being discovered all over again.

In the play Lazarus makes his way back to his house and the whole village of Bethany is awash with wonder. Finally, somebody gets the courage to ask what is on everyone's mind, "Lazarus, tell us what it's like to die. What lies on the other side of this fearsome boundary that none of us has crossed?"

And Lazarus begins to laugh even more intensely, and then he says, "There is no death, really. There is only life. There is only God. There is only incredible joy." He continues, "Death is not the way it appears from this side. Death is not an abyss into which we go; rather, it is like a portal through which we move ... into everlasting life."

He then says, "The One who meets us there is the same Generosity that gave us our lives in the beginning, the One who gave us our birth. Not because we deserved it but because that generous One wanted us to be. So there is nothing to fear. The grave is as empty as a doorway is empty. It is a portal through which we move into greater life. There is nothing to fear. Our great agenda is to learn to accept, to trust, to love more fully. There is only life. There is no death."

And with that his laughter begins to fill the whole house in which he is staying.

Well, in the play Lazarus goes back to his daily tasks and yet there is something different. He is no longer anxious, no longer vulnerable to that fear that diminishes the vitality of all our lives. The house where he lives becomes known as the "House of Laughter," and night after night one can hear singing and dancing. The spirit of this message, that there is nothing to fear, begins to spread throughout the whole little village. The quality of work begins to rise all over Bethany. People begin to live more humanely and more generously with each other. There do not seem to be the old occasions for

conflict that there used to be. In fact, a joy settles over this whole community because someone has come back saying there is finally nothing to fear.

However, not everyone in Bethany is pleased with this turn of events. The Romans are quick to sense that this one who has lost his fear of death is, in fact, a threat to the very kind of control that they like to maintain. You see, the key to intimidation is always that incipient fear of death. The way any tyrant holds people down is by suggesting that if they don't obey, then something terrible — like death — will be used against them. The Romans were masters at intimidation, and Lazarus represents a real threat. But how do you intimidate someone who is no longer afraid of death?

In the play, the authorities move in on Lazarus. They tell him to quit laughing. They tell him his house can no longer be the occasion of parties. But Lazarus only laughs all the more. “The truth is,” he says, “there is nothing you can do to me. There is no death. There is only life.”

The Romans are so frustrated that they arrest him and take him to Caesarea, where he appears before a higher official. But he is not able to do anything with Lazarus, either. And so, in the play, Lazarus is taken all the way to Rome.

The play reaches its climax as Lazarus stands face to face with the Roman Emperor. This is the man who is allegedly the most powerful of all on earth. He says to Lazarus, “You have a choice. You'll either stop this infernal laughter right this minute, or I will have you put to death.” And Lazarus continues to laugh. He says to the Emperor, “Go ahead and do what you will. There is no death. There is only life.”

And so the play ends, with the little man who is no longer afraid of death being more powerful than the ruler of the mighty Roman Empire.

Today we gather with Christians around the world to celebrate the festival of All Saints. We gather to give thanks for matriarchs and patriarchs, prophets and apostles, the giants of our faith. We gather to celebrate that innumerable throng of men and women who have gone before us, people whose faith and life and labours have brought us to this day, yet whose names are known only to God. We also gather to recall and give thanks for those ordinarily faithful people who have touched our lives, yet who are now at rest.

Quite often, I believe, we mistakenly live as though all there is to life is this immediate moment, or the span of our own years. We overlook our deep indebtedness to the countless generations which have come before us. Or, similarly, we ignore our responsibility to those who will come after us. In either case, we impoverish our own lives and we diminish our deep and abiding relationship with all the faithful of every time and place.

But today, the Festival of All Saints, is an occasion to declare boldly, "There is only life. There is only God." For in spite of death's apparent tyranny, today is a reminder that we need no longer be afraid. In Christ, we are all bound to one another, across time and space, in one great communion. And though we will all know the grief of partings, and though we will all, one day, pass through that dark portal, the faint echoes of a great and distant chorus, penetrating the gloom, hint at something more.

"There is only life! There is only God!" Lazarus laughed. May it be the same for us! Amen.

Notes

- ¹ This sermon was preached on All Saints Sunday, 5 November 2006, in Mount Zion Lutheran Church, Waterloo, Ontario, where Mark Harris was then the pastor.
- ² Eugene O'Neill, *Nine Plays* (New York: The Modern Library, 1959).