

Sermon for Sunday, November 1, 2015  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

It always strikes me as ironic  
that in Year B in our Lectionary,  
that is this year,  
the reading for the Feast of All Saints  
is the story of the raising  
of Lazarus.

Last night  
in case you missed it  
was Halloween,  
and here we have  
in all its glory  
the story of a mummy,  
the walking dead,  
grave clothes flapping,  
coming out of a tomb.

Last night  
the streets were filled with children, small and large,  
dressed in costumes  
and begging for candy,  
and it was tempting to join them  
dressed as Lazarus!

Halloween  
is not a holiday  
that I grew up  
celebrating.  
For a start,  
it wasn't a big deal in Australia, at least not then,  
plus my parents didn't believe  
that it was an appropriate holiday for Christians to celebrate.

The roots of Halloween  
as best as I can tell  
go back to the ancient Celtic celebration of the new year,

marking the end of summer and the harvest and the beginning of the dark, cold winter.  
The Celts believed  
that on the night before the new year,  
the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead became blurred, and that the  
ghosts of the dead returned to earth.  
So they celebrated the festival of Samhain (sow-in)  
built huge bonfires for protection,  
dressed up as animals,  
and offered sacrifices.

Then the Romans came  
and combined their festival marking the passing of the dead  
with Samhain.  
Then, as Christianity spread across the Empire,  
the church made the first of November a feast day to remember all the saints, All Saints  
Day,  
and the following day, All Souls Day,  
to honor the dead.  
And as often happens, all the traditions got muddled together,  
All Souls Day began to be celebrated similarly to the traditional Samhain, with big  
bonfires, parades, and people dressing up in costumes as saints, angels and devils,  
a way  
to shake your fist at death  
and claim God's life-giving power.  
Then the eve of All Saints,  
also known as All Hallows,  
became known as All Hallows Eve,  
the celebrations migrated to that evening,  
and Halloween as we know it  
was born,  
though it never really became a big deal  
until the nineteenth century here in America.

But it wasn't until the twentieth century  
that it became a truly secular event,  
separated from the celebration of All Saints and All Souls  
and the promise of life for all the faithful.

And perhaps the story of Lazarus  
is exactly the right reading for today,

as we Christians,  
on this feast of All Saints,  
assert  
the power of Christ  
to destroy death  
and bring life  
to all God's saints, past and present  
and yet to come.

Mary was devastated.  
Her brother,  
her only brother,  
had died.  
Sick for days,  
and she had sent a message  
to the only one she knew  
who might have helped,  
their family friend, Jesus,  
who was known for healing people,  
and by the time he came  
it was too late.  
Lazarus had died.  
So when Jesus arrived,  
all she could do  
was cry,  
and Jesus  
with her.

And then Jesus  
began to hear the gossip.  
“Couldn't he have done something?”  
“He's supposed to have healed plenty of people. You'd think  
he'd have bothered  
with one of his friends.”  
“Maybe it was all too good to be true. I always suspected it.”  
Overwhelming the quiet murmurs  
of those who saw his grief  
and honored it.

And Jesus heard the gossip,

and it wrenched his heart even more,  
and suddenly he said, with an apparent show of bravado,  
“Take away the stone.”

And it was Martha who blurted out  
what many of them were thinking.  
“It’ll stink!”

And you could almost hear Jesus sigh.  
This was Martha speaking.  
And yes, she was the one  
who was always concerned about practical things,  
but she was also the one  
who five minutes earlier  
had rushed to greet him saying, just like her sister later,  
“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”  
But Martha had added  
“But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him”,  
and, after Jesus saying that he is the resurrection and the life, and anyone who believes,  
even though they die, will live,  
Martha  
has gone on to make an amazing profession of faith,  
“I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”  
But now,  
faced with the sight of the closed tomb  
her faith had deserted her  
and all she could think of  
is how bad the body would smell.

“Martha, weren’t you listening?”

So they rolled away the stone  
the blocked the entrance to the tomb,  
and Jesus began to pray,  
aloud,  
so that all the people listening,  
especially the ones  
who had been gossiping  
would know what was going on.

"Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me."  
When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice,

And then shouted, "Lazarus, come out!"

And he came out,  
the walking dead,  
and it wasn't until  
they had unwrapped the grave clothes  
that they saw him,  
Lazarus,  
alive!

At Halloween  
and at All Saints  
we Christians  
have another story to tell.  
Of a God who can  
destroy death,  
a God who gives  
incredible new life.  
Not just  
as in Lazarus' case,  
brought back to life  
only to die again  
at a ripe old age,  
but all of us, through baptism,  
given life  
that last beyond death,  
life eternal,  
with God's saints  
in glory!

We believe  
in a death-destroying  
life-giving  
God.

Even though

we are surrounded  
by death.  
The news of another plane crash, killing everyone on board.  
Syrian refugees flooding into Europe,  
some dying  
in the attempt,  
and US forces mobilized  
to fight ISIS in Syria.  
Another shooting,  
this time, four dead.  
Our world needs  
the good news,  
news  
of a death-destroying  
life-giving  
God.  
And we need it too.  
In our lives  
and in our church.

It's so easy  
to focus on what's bad, isn't it?  
To always be negative?

Many of the people  
who'd been at the tomb,  
saw Lazarus alive,  
and believed in Jesus.  
But not everyone.  
Some, probably the same ones  
who had complained  
that he hadn't bothered to save his friend,  
saw Lazarus alive,  
and headed off to the religious leaders to complain  
that Jesus doing something  
caused too many people to follow him,  
and the Romans might be threatened.  
All they could see  
is death;  
they couldn't see

the good news of life!

It's so easy to do.

Mostly it happens via gossip.

"Did you see that?"

"I heard

that so-and-so did such-and-such."

"Why didn't X

do it like we always did?"

We rarely gossip good news.

No wonder it's so undermining in any community,

and even more so in the church

where we are supposed to be sharing the good news.

How different would it be

if what we gossiped

was good news?

"Wasn't it wonderful that..."

"I loved seeing..."

"Did you hear how great..."

As Christians

we have another story to tell.

We have the story

of a death-destroying,

life-giving

God.

And so,

as we end our annual stewardship drive

I invite you to once again

find a couple of people around you,

preferably not related to you,

and share with them

some good news

of how you see our death-destroying,

life-giving

God

at work in our parish.