

Sermon – Saturday, November 6, 2021

Rev. Randi

I'd like us to think about a period in our lives when we suffered significant loss. Perhaps our husband or parents died. Perhaps our children died. Maybe we were very sick. Perhaps we experienced multiple difficulties and tragedies within a short time frame, such as divorce and death, or loss of job and major illness and death of a friend.

For me, the last 18 months have been that time. I've lost two friends and a relative, and many members of my church family. Another one of my friends had his leg amputated. I've lost the ability to just stop by a hospital or nursing home to visit someone in their room. I can no longer decide at the last minute to go to water aerobics.

Perhaps the last 18 months have been a time of great loss for you. Or maybe another time of life has been more difficult. During those times of great loss, our emotions run the gamut. We are sometimes in denial – like the disciples in the Gospel today who thought Lazarus was only asleep. Or we second guess ourselves and others, like Lazarus's sisters who say, "Lord, if you'd only been here, my brother wouldn't have died." We might say things such as if only the doctor had caught the cancer earlier. Perhaps we cry out to God, "Why did you choose to heal my neighbor, but not my child?" Or "Why does God let COVID continue so long?"

These emotions and thoughts are a normal part of the grief process. We have to go through these dark emotions before we can come out healed on the other side of them. The important thing to remember is that God is present during these times of great sorrow. Something good will come out of these times, even if we cannot understand what it will be at the time. God will bring us and the situation into a new light. Sorrows and even death are not the ends – they are just interruptions in our life of faith.

We know the story of Lazarus and the Easter story. We know that God brings new life out of what has died. The new life isn't the same as the old life; it is richer. Think about what it was like for Lazarus to be sick and hope for Jesus to come to heal him, but die without Jesus's appearing. Think about what it was like to then be put into a dark tomb only to hear the voice of Jesus calling him to come out. Think of then going walking in those tight grave clothes into the light, following the voice of Jesus. I imagine Lazarus was a different man after that experience. Some of the everyday things he thought necessary probably now seemed trivial. Having died once, Lazarus also knew what would await him when he died again. Perhaps he feared death less than he did before. Maybe the loss of that fear made him live more boldly into his calling to love God and his neighbor. Perhaps when Jesus called to those to unbind Lazarus and let him go, he meant that both literally and figuratively. Lazarus needed to be free of his burial clothes. Lazarus also needed to be free of fears that may have held him back from truly serving God.

However, new life doesn't just come out of physical death. When we are in places of deep darkness and depression, we can hear Jesus calling us, too, if we listen. Anytime we have moments when we die to something we feel is essential, we can rise to a new

life in Jesus. We can come out of these places with a fresh perspective. Things we once thought important may be trivial, while our new mission to serve God becomes all-important. We may become more daring in our call to serve God.

So, when we grieve over those people we've lost, we know they are safe with the Lord. When we go into the darkest time of grief, we can also hear Jesus calling to us to die to that grief and rise to a new mission. When we grieve over the past few months of loss, if we listen, we can hear God calling us to die to an old way of serving and rise to a new way.

The Rev. Cynthia Jarvis provides a definition of a saint that is pertinent to our times. She writes, "Real people who live in the face of death before the God who raised Jesus from the dead are simply called saints. They are those who realize before they die that neither death nor life, things present nor things to come, can separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus. They are those who, therefore, may dare everything for the sake of this one true thing."ⁱ

We are the saints. We are those people who have lived through times of significant loss and death. We are those who realize before we die that nothing can separate us from the love of God. No matter what darkness or death occurs, Jesus is with us.

Keeping this knowledge that God is always with us in mind, we are called to release our fears and truly live for God. Let Jesus unbind you and let you go.

ⁱ C. A. Jarvis, [Pastoral Perspective on John 11:32–44](#). In D. L. Bartlett & B. B. Taylor (Eds.), *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year B* (Vol. 4, p. 240). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.