

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, October 30, 2022

The Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Evensong

4 p.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Mark Schultz, *Associate for Pastoral Care*

on

Lamentations 3:22-33; John 11:1-44

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The Thin Veil

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Tomorrow is Halloween.

And one of my favorite things that some Halloween-loving people say about Halloween is this:

“It is a time when the veil between this world and the next
is thinnest.

When the curtain between worlds
is easily parted.”

It’s incredibly evocative: the idea that for a day,
the world is shot through with a kind of dangerous magic
where boundaries are blurred, definitions unclear, this side and that side uncertain.

Who knows what might come stumbling
or crashing

or floating
or eerily dancing into our world?

Who knows but that,
on our way home from work or from school or from the store
we might stop for a moment,
look around,

and discover ourselves in some unfamiliar place,
in a new world of strange beauty and mysterious terror.

Will we ever make it back? Will things ever be the same?

It’s spooky.

It’s what Halloween’s about, really: the unreliable thinness of things.

The destabilizing suspicion
that there’s an aspect to everything in our lives,

everything in our lives,
that is not quite what it seems.

That our reality is ephemeral.

That *we* are ephemeral.

And that one day, we are all going to die.

It’s scary.

Because for the most part, we don’t actually know what that means.

Death. Right?

Though it's fun, at least for a day, to *pretend* that we actually do.
Right?

Our passage from John, though,
hints that we've gotten it a bit *backwards*.

If we're really honest with ourselves,
it's not actually death that we know so little about.

It's life.

And that's the shocking reality of our pilgrimage here on earth.

We know a lot more about death
than we would ever dare admit to ourselves.

Death: the division from which all division springs.

In our Gospel this evening

Jesus does the equivalent
of crashing a funeral
and ordering the dead man's tomb opened.

Let me say that again.

Jesus crashes a funeral.

And orders the dead man's tomb.

To be opened.

I don't know how many funerals you've attended, but that's not usually how funerals go. There's a crowd
surrounding Jesus,

weeping and wailing,

loudly mourning.

And Jesus, too, is a mourner.

John tells us that very succinctly, "Jesus wept."

And certainly he's weeping for his friend, Lazarus.

Certainly he feels empathy for Lazarus' sisters,
for the crowd of mourners.

But there's more than that.

Our gospel says that Jesus

"groaned in the spirit and was troubled"

but the English here is not quite right.

It's a bit reserved.

Because the Greek carries more of a sense of

"Jesus was visibly and profoundly angered."

Why?

Because as one commentator writes,

Jesus, the Lord of Life, knows that he is

"face to face with the realm of Satan . . . represented [here] by death."

And he's angry.

Because death is not what Jesus wills for us.

Because death was never part of the plan.

But Jesus enters into the place of death here and is preparing for a confrontation.

And the place of death is not just the cemetery

or the tomb near which our story is set.

No. My favorite theologian, James Alison, points out that

the place of death here is the death-minded crowd in which Jesus finds himself—
it is a whole *community* defined and constructed by death.

So what does Jesus do.

He orders the tomb to be opened.

A profoundly audacious act, a sign of his own resurrection to come.

He orders the tomb to be opened.
And the people around him are dumbstruck.
They can't imagine what's coming. How can they?
"Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days"
"Take ye away the stone." He says.
And they do.
And the Resurrection and the Life stands in the midst of death,
and he says to Lazarus, "Come forth."
But he isn't just talking to Lazarus when he says "Come forth!"
He isn't just talking to the *obviously* dead man.
No: he's shouting here
above the weeping and the wailing of the crowd
so that the *crowd* can hear him.
He's shouting to the crowd and telling *them*: "Come forth!"
Come forth out of your deep mourning.
Come forth out of your places of sorrow.
Come out of your death-centeredness.
Come forth and live.
And he's shouting to us, too,
through the pages of scripture,
he shouts to us: you are dead in your sins,
but in me, you are made alive.
You are in bondage to sin and cannot free yourselves,
but I am your freedom.
You are broken by shame and sorrow,
by cycles of oppression, abuse and addiction,
but I am your healing and your wholeness.
I call you out from death today.
I call you out from your divisions today
These divisions that are so many instances of death in your lives.
Come forth into new and abundant life.
It is a profound and disturbing irony, then,
that the same word used to describe Jesus crying out with a loud voice,
bringing life to the tombs,
is the same word that will describe the shouts of the crowds
who will demand his death when they cry
"Crucify him!"
"I desire life for you," says the Lord.
And our response is, "Crucify him."
We are so lost in death,
in division
that we cannot abide Life. We don't understand it.
But Jesus is not willing for us to be lost.
Not content to call from outside the grave,
Jesus will descend by the ladder of the cross
into the very heart of the grave itself
and he will break the gates of brass
and he will call out to every soul
through all of time and space,
he calls to us even now:
"Come forth!"
Contrary to all expectation, life comes crashing out of death.

And neither death nor life will ever be the same.
The curtain between worlds
The veil between us and God
Between us and them
Between you and me
is torn from top to bottom.

We've been living in death all along and did not know it.
We've been Halloween people all along,
And did not know it.
But Jesus
calls
to life.

us

Lazarus tumbles out of the tomb, still wrapped in his grave-clothes.
And that's also an image of us, really, isn't it,
in the midst of our Christian journey.
We're stumbling out of death,
but still wrapped in death,
still troubled and befuddled by death
just beginning to understand what the life to which we are called might look like.
We've had our fill of death.
We can admit to ourselves now, finally:
we know too much of death, and not enough of life,
not enough of the unimaginable life that God desires for us,
to which God calls us.
But Jesus gives a hint as to how this life might look in its living.
As Lazarus shuffles, still death-bound from the tomb,
Jesus says to the slackjawed and gobsmacked crowd
"Loose him, and let him go."
What if, we're being asked,
What if we were to understand our task, together as church,
As a transformed community in which death is being undone,
What if we understood our lives
As opportunities to love each other
With a love that liberates?
That unbinds?
A love in which others discover themselves more alive?
A love that is the deathless life of God working in and through us
to do more than we can either ask or imagine?

Beloved, this is indeed a time when we are invited to see
that the veil between this world and the next
is thin. That the curtain between worlds
is easily parted. That it has, in fact, already been parted.
When we can hear a voice beyond all time and space
Crying out to us:
Come forth.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.