

“Come and See”

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All Saints Sunday

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When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “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, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.” (John 11:32-44)

In my experience, All Saints Sunday brings a strange mix of emotions. There is a genuine warmth that comes when we take time to remember with gratitude those people we have cherished and loved who are no longer with us, because their mortal lives have ended. There is also the grief of revisiting these losses, an ache that never really goes away. And then, going beyond these more familiar feelings, there are cold, perhaps even foreboding questions that many of us have about the nature of death. What happens to us when we die? What lies on the other side of death? Is death just a void, a sea of nothingness, or is there more beyond?

These kinds of questions are one of the reasons that I am drawn to the gospel of John. More than any other gospel, John shares the story of Jesus through questions... questions that most people have... questions that are not easily answered. And some of the most vexing of these questions are answered in one, very specific way: **“come and see.”**

The pattern pops up almost immediately. In the first chapter of the gospel, everyone is fascinated with John the Baptist. “Who are you?” they ask. They are thinking he might be the chosen one, the Messiah. When he denies it, the questions really start raining down. “What then? Are you Elijah?... Are you the prophet?... Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

The next day two men are so taken and curious about who Jesus might be that they leave home to follow Jesus and learn more. Knowing that he is being followed, he turns and asks them a question. “What are you looking for?” he asks. Instead of answering, they respond with a question of their own. “Teacher,” they ask, “where are you staying?”

And for the first time, we hear the cryptic answer: **“Come and see.”**



And they did, and by four o'clock in the afternoon, they had seen enough to proclaim "We have found the Messiah."

The very next day, Philip, another follower of Jesus, went into town to share the same news with his friend Nathanael. "We have found the one written about by Moses and the prophets," he said, "Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael, who was a skeptic and nobody's fool, had many questions, but the first one was this: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nathanael knew Nazareth wasn't anything special... not the kind of place where leaders and visionaries would come from, let alone a Messiah. And how does Philip answer that question? "***Come and see.***"

And Nathanael did. And in less than a minute in the presence of Jesus, Nathanael had seen enough. "Rabbi," he said, "you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

Later, Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well and asks her for a drink. Again, the dialogue starts with a question. "How is it," she asks, "that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

"You are asking the wrong question," Jesus replies. "If you knew the gift of God, and who I am, you would have asked me for a drink, and I would have given you living water." More questions follow, and more mystical answers, and soon she too is running off to tell her people. "***Come and see,***" she exclaims. "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! Could this be the Messiah? Come with me and let's find out."

Again and again, in the face of puzzling existential questions, the invitation is given: Come and see.

Who is God? Come and see.

Where can we find God's presence? Come and see.

How can I be healed of what burdens me? Come and see.

Does God really know me, really love me? Come and see.

And then we come to this morning's passage, which delves right into the greatest mystery of all. Here the questions that are literally matters of life and death. Jesus was close friends with Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus. The gospel says plainly that Jesus loved them. So, when Lazarus fell sick, Jesus makes a change of plans and brings his entire entourage to Bethany, just a few short miles from Jerusalem. It was a dangerous move, as powerful people in that area were conspiring to capture and kill Jesus. But love and faith rose above fear, and Jesus went.

By the time he arrived, Lazarus had been dead for four days. He finds Martha first. "I am the resurrection and the life," Christ says to her. "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

"Yes, Lord," she answers. "I believe." And she did, but she did not yet understand what that might mean for her, and for her dead brother Lazarus.

And then Mary enters, distraught and undone with grief. "*Lord,*" she says, "*if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" The question on her heart, unspoken but obvious, was simple: "Where were you? Where have you been?"

Jesus knew that was the question, and he could feel her pain. The way John writes it, Jesus was "*greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.*" The Greek makes it clear that the emotional pain was so great that Jesus bowed physically under its weight. Seeing his friend hurting was a gut punch to him. Even so, yet again in lieu of a clear answer, the response to that question was another question. "Where have you laid him?"

And this time it not Jesus who speaks the ominous words, but a broken, grieving Mary. “*Lord,*” she says, come and see.” And at that, Jesus begins to weep.

We might say this was an expression of his own grief about the death of Lazarus, but Jesus had known that already. It is much more likely that it was Mary’s response – more particularly her invitation – that really got to him. Mary was hurt that Jesus had not come sooner. She felt let down, angry, disappointed. Even so, she wanted her dear friend close by. She wanted Jesus to walk with her down into the deepest recesses of her grief, and the darkest reaches of her pain.

And Jesus goes with her.

What comes next is, as John sees it, Christ’s greatest miracle. It was also the last straw for those who were hunting Jesus and wanted him gone. In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it was Jesus’ bold act of turning over the tables of the money changers and clearing the temple from unholy greed that finally sealed his fate. But for John it was the moment when Jesus showed everyone that he had power even over life and death. When they saw that power, the scribes and Pharisees decided once and for all that Jesus would have to go.

I in no way want to detract from the power and significance of that miracle, but this morning I would like for us to focus on the three words that help to define our own experience of All Saints Sunday. The life of faith confronts us with difficult questions that defy easy answers. They are the same for us today as they were for the first people who encountered Jesus. In the presence of Christ, we still ask them. Who are you? Where do you come from? Do you know me? Do you love me? Can you heal me? And at the end, what will happen to me?

And the answer to all of these questions is, at its most basic, the invitation of faith: “***Come and see.***” These answers cannot be given in a few words. Finding them will require some curiosity. It will require some effort and some time. And it will require some trust. But Christ invites us to come with him into these mysteries. And he also wants us to ask him to come with us into our deepest fears, and our greatest hopes. He wants that in the deepest parts of his own spirit, heart, and soul.

In the city of Valladolid, Spain, near the Straits of Gibraltar, stands a 16th century monument that dates back to the Age of Discovery. The sculpture features a banner bearing the Latin words “*Ne Plus Ultra,*” which was the original motto of the Kingdom of Spain. The motto had been taken from the ancient myth of the Greek hero Hercules, who, according to legend, had erected two massive rock pillars to mark the passage through the Straits of Gibraltar. These pillars, which marked the edge of the known world, bore the words “*Ne Plus Ultra*” -- “*No More Beyond.*” Spaniards the motto was fitting, since their homeland was known as the westernmost limit of the earth.

On this particular statue, however, a huge lion is shown swiping away one of the words from that old motto. The claws of its massive paw, which are ripping away the word “*Ne,*” leave a very different message – a statement that the people of Spain no longer believed that the sea to their west was a vast ocean of nothingness. Brave explorers had returned with testimony that there were vast worlds out there to discover... that there was “*Plus Ultra*”... more beyond.

That is the enduring message of the story of Lazarus and the story of All Saints Sunday. In this world, we often tell ourselves that we have seen all we need to see, we know all we need to know, that all there is to explore and conquered has already been explored and

conquered. But faith tells us that there is a place beyond what we know... there is knowledge beyond what our eyes can now see and our minds can now understand. As we confront our deepest questions of faith and fear, life and death, Christ continues to knock on the doors of our spirits with the open invitation... "***Come and See.***" Amen.