

“Made Alive in Christ”

1 Corinthians 15.1-26

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Remembrance Sunday. An annual opportunity to *remember* those who have gone before us. To recall them to mind, to be mindful of them again – that’s what *remembrance* means. *Memory ... again.*

We do this every year, on the first Sunday of November, either on or shortly after All Saints’ Day, which has been celebrated on November 1 for about twelve centuries, since at least the time of Charlemagne, around the year 800 AD. Prior to that, beginning around the year 400 AD, there was an annual feast day to venerate the martyrs of the faith. The tradition of commemorating our honored dead in worship once a year has a very long history.

In some traditions All Saints’ Day is known as All *Hallows’* Day; sometimes it is called *Hallowmas*. The word “hallow” means to “honor as holy” or “consider sacred” or “venerate.” On All Saints’ Day we *hallow* the saints who have gone before us. Thus the night before All Saints’ Day was once known as All Hallows’ Eve, the *beginning* of the sacred celebration of the veneration of the saints; in Scotland this came to be known as “All Hallows’ Even,” which over time became contracted to “Hallowe’en.” We know it today as simply “Halloween,” though I’d venture to guess that most people who celebrate Halloween with costumes and trick-or-treating probably have no idea that it was once a very sacred vigil in Christian tradition. There are a number of churches that have reservations about celebrating Halloween, seeing in it connections to witchcraft and the occult; there was actually quite a discussion about Halloween in the Mason Ministerial Association a week or two ago, as we have at least one pastor here in town who doesn’t want the members of their congregation having anything to do with Halloween. Most of the rest of us tend to see it as relatively harmless and fun; I personally tend to be more concerned about the vast quantity of sugar that kids consume than I am about occult activities – though I respect the fact that for some of my colleagues, those concerns are very, very real.

In some Christian traditions, there is a three-day cycle: the vigil of All Hallows’ Eve on October 31, followed by All Hallows’ Day (or All Saints’ Day, or Hallowmas) on November 1, followed by All *Souls* Day, on November 2. The whole thing – all three days combined – is known as “Allhallowtide.” If I understand this correctly, the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, many Anglican churches, and some other Protestant churches observe this three-day cycle. The distinction between the second and third days is interesting: the celebration on November 1 commemorates those who those who have been fully sanctified in Christ, whether known or unknown, while the celebration on

November 2 commemorates all Christians who have died. It's a subtle but important difference: technically speaking, *any* Christian who has died can be commemorated on November 2, while the list of those people who are commemorated on November 1 is known only to God. If we're going to be purists about this, we'd have to say that what we do here every year on the first Sunday in November is more like All *Souls'* Day than All *Saints'* Day. We tend to make the *assumption* that everybody we've got on our list has been sanctified in Christ. In truth, *God* gets to decide that – not us.

Nevertheless, what we do here is important. We *honor* and *remember* all these beloved Christians who have died: friends and family members, treasured souls, now no longer inhabiting this plane of existence. In most cases, this is the *second* time they have been honored and remembered; the first was at their funeral or memorial service. That's another important distinction: *memorial* service means just what it sounds like, a time for honoring the *memory* of the beloved departed. But what does *funeral* mean? The term originally comes from the Latin word *funus*, which meant “death” or “corpse” and also was used to refer to the funerary rites themselves. Linguists think that Latin word may itself derive from a proto-Indo-European verb meaning simply, “to die.” So the word *funeral* places the emphasis on *death*, whereas the term “memorial service” places the emphasis on *memory* – *remembering* the deceased. That's why, in common parlance today, when we use the word “funeral” we mean a service where the *body* is present, like in a casket; whereas when we use the term “memorial service” we typically mean a service in which the body is *not* present.

The problem with both of those terms – funeral *and* memorial service – is that neither one of them conveys the *fullness* of what we do here, as Christians, when somebody dies. Yes, we *honor* and *remember* the person who has died; of *course*. But that is not *all* we do. We also give public affirmation of our firm conviction that that person's life didn't just *end* when they died. The New Testament teaching is that, for those of us who hold faith in Jesus Christ, there's something *more*. There is a *new* life, a *resurrected* life, *life from death*. When we gather for a service here following someone's death, we *honor* and *remember* them, but we also bear witness to this critically important Christian understanding. That's why we call it a “service of witness to the resurrection.” We bear witness to the resurrection of Christ, for one ... and to the resurrection of our beloved deceased, for another.

Not everybody believes in that today. There are a host of people, including many church-goers, who don't believe that there's anything beyond this life, or who believe in something different altogether (reincarnation, for example). You can really get a sense of what people *truly* believe by the words they use when they're planning a funeral or memorial service for a loved one, or when they're writing an obituary. They may have the punch card that says they're Christian, they may be on the membership roll of some well-established church, but that's no guarantee of what they really *believe*. A family member might say, “I just want the service to be a real *celebration of life*.” Okay, we can celebrate their life – but are we just celebrating their *life here on earth*, a life that has *ended*? Or are we *also* celebrating their *resurrected* life in Christ – and the fact that such resurrection actually *happens*? Sometimes you get the sense that people feel like they *should* believe in life everlasting, but it's fairly evident that they really don't. Or at least, that they hold that concept with a great deal of skepticism.

It's not a new problem. Paul had to deal with it, two thousand years ago. “Now if Christ is

proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?" (1 Corinthians 15.12) He wouldn't have spent so much time and energy talking about the resurrection here in 1 Corinthians if it hadn't been an issue. *There were Christians back then who had trouble believing in it too.* Today's skepticism is nothing new.

Paul can't produce any *evidence* that would *prove* the resurrection. All he has to offer is his own faith, and some fairly complicated logic. For Paul, *our* resurrection is directly linked to *Christ's* resurrection: "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain." (1 Corinthians 15.13-14) You can't have it only partway: either Christ was raised from the dead and *we* will be raised from the dead; or Christ was *not* raised from the dead, and neither will we. It's all or nothing; there is no middle ground. You can't believe that Christ was raised from the dead but we won't be: that logic doesn't work. Why not? *Because of what Christ's death accomplished.* It *reversed* what happened back in the very beginning, in the garden. There were two trees: the tree of life, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve ate from the wrong tree. When they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they could no longer eat from the tree of life, with the result that *they were going to die.* God's intent had been for them to live forever. That's why Paul says "death came through a human being" (1 Corinthians 15.21); he's referring to Adam. Everybody who has descended from Adam is subject to death, and that includes all of us. But what God has done in and through Jesus is a game-changer. The Romans nail him up on two pieces of wood, *and he dies.* Because he was living a human life, *he was subject to death,* just like the rest of us. But because he was God incarnate, *death couldn't hold him.* He *beat death.* What Christ has accomplished, *we get to experience.* The victory over death wasn't just for him. It was for *all* of us. It reverses what happened back in the garden. It rectifies the situation that had been created when Adam and Eve ate from the wrong tree. This was one of the primary reasons why Jesus came – to *undo the curse* that was binding *all* of us. *God's design for all of us from the start was freedom and life – not binding and death.* Only the fully human, fully divine, Son of Man, Son of God could break the curse and *liberate* us to life. So Paul calls Jesus "the first fruits of those who have died" (1 Corinthians 15.20) – like the first grain in a harvest. There's a whole *field* out there, not just one stalk. Those of us who are in Christ are part of that field. If you have been claimed in the waters of baptism; if you have died and risen with Christ when you professed your faith in Jesus Christ; if you have been marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit, then what happened to Christ will happen to you too. *The resurrection life is yours. You too will be made alive in Christ.*

Now this gives rise to a host of other questions. Those questions aren't new. "Someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of a body do they come?'" (1 Corinthians 15.35) Read the rest of the chapter to see how Paul answers the questions. "What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body; it is raised a spiritual body." (1 Corinthians 15.42-44) And so on. It's a majestic, magnificent testimony to our resurrected life with Christ. *Death is not the end!* Not for us who are in Christ. No, there's more. A glorious resurrection, *made alive in Christ ... a gift to you and me.*

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