

# Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

## Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church  
1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

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### Undoing the Bonds of Death

John 11:32-44

All Saints' Communion

Jesus was too late. At least that's what everybody thought. You and I know better, of course. We're privileged to know the rest of the story, as Paul Harvey was famous for saying. Or do we? Seems to me we focus in on the raising of Lazarus. And why not? That seems to be what the story is about. And yet, Jesus says that Lazarus' illness was "not unto death; it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it." Yet Lazarus was dead. Had been for four days. Jesus was too late. Or was he?

By raising Lazarus, Jesus was signing his own death warrant. Or do we misunderstand John when he writes that, "from that day on," the Priests and the Pharisees, "took counsel how to put him to death." Jesus was too late to help Lazarus, or so Martha thought, but we know the rest of the story. Raising Lazarus led directly to the glorification of Jesus as God's son in his crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus had to be late in order to give his life for the world.

Lest there be any doubt in our minds about the connection between this story and Jesus' crucifixion, take note of these parallels. Fred Craddock notes: "Jesus is troubled and weeping; the tomb is not far from Jerusalem; the tomb is a cave with a large stone covering the opening; the stone is rolled away; Jesus cries with a loud voice; the grave cloth is left at the tomb." Then Craddock asks, "Sound familiar?"<sup>1</sup> Oh yes, all that sounds familiar. But what does, we may ask, does it have to do with us on All Saints Day?

There's a certain heroic character to one who sacrifices his life to save another. We certainly acknowledge that when a soldier takes heroic measures to rescue comrades in danger or when firefighters or police charge into a dangerous situation to rescue folks. Nowadays, it seems, every soldier is called a hero, whether he does something heroic or not. And I confess, I've been critical of that trend. Calling everybody a hero seems to cheapen the actions of those who are truly heroic.

On the other hand, why should we draw a distinction between what we deem heroic and what others might? Was there really any difference between the firefighters who ran into the World Trade Center on 9/11 and those who remained outside to assist people who were fleeing? I've begun to rethink my objection, to recognize that each soldier, each firefighter, each person that puts on a uniform displays courage beyond imagining. Jesus was heroic, to be sure. But so were Mary, Martha, Lazarus. So too every one who responds to the call of Christ. Not to the same extent as Jesus by any means, but their courage is nevertheless admirable.

Understood that way, we can begin to appreciate why Paul called all Christians saints. You and I tend to think of saints only in terms of Francis of Assisi and Mother Teresa. But that thinking is all too like what I was doing with the word hero. Maybe we need to rethink that. To be sure, some individuals stand tall before us as supreme examples. But that should not take away from the faithfulness of the others. We are about to read the names of people who died in the past year. They have gone before us,

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, A Twofold Death and Resurrection, *Christian Century*, March 21-28, (year ??), p. 299, presented by Religion Online, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=710>.

some living saintly lives, others, perhaps not so saintly. And yet, to live as they lived, to serve Jesus, requires of all of us the same courage they displayed.

I think we understate the courage each of us must have to be disciples of Christ. I know we don't think like that. But consider the courage of the recovering alcoholic who must fight the bonds of addiction to reaffirm a life saving decision every day. Consider the faith of a couple struggling to heal a troubled marriage facing their own complicity, their own brokenness. Or consider the person who struggles to learn how to walk on artificial limbs, or the person striving to regain speech or dexterity after a stroke. How about the faith of parents who entrust their children to bus drivers and teachers every day not knowing what awaits the child along the way? Or the faith of people who visit prisoners, or feed the poor, or attend to the sick. Is there not a quality of sainthood in their lives? That same quality of sainthood is in our own.

Oh, we may tend to downplay that, just as soldiers downplay their actions every time they shrug their shoulders and say that they were only doing their duty. Well, we're only doing our duty when we pray, and study the Scriptures and reach out to others in Christ's name. And in doing so, we are bearing witness to one who undoes the bonds of death that others may live. Indeed, each and every time we extend a helping hand to another in the name of Jesus we are, ourselves, calling someone out of the tomb and into a new life.

Jesus was not too late to raise Lazarus. Nor is he too late to raise us. Yet it is not up to him alone. When Lazarus came out of the tomb Jesus commanded those around him to unbind him and let him go. You and I are reminded that no one is beyond reach of Christ's call to new life. No one is beyond hope. Thus we are called to reach out to them and draw them into a new life in Christ, to unbind them and let them go. In calling Lazarus out of the tomb, Jesus opened the doorway to his own tomb. But God raised him up from death so that all of us who take up our cross and follow him may have hope. Jesus was not too late to save Lazarus. Jesus is not too late to save us. Jesus has power over all of life, even death.

As we come to this table today, let us remember that each of these saints have in some way born witness to us of Christ's love that we might have life in Christ, and have it abundantly.