

I am just so happy to be here as your new vicar. Perhaps I should try to contain my enthusiasm a bit; you'll think that I don't have a realistic idea that there is much work to be done, and not all of it will be fun. But I see no reason to quell the excitement. Happy times are to be, well, happy. I am always amazed at how the Spirit works, bringing new life to you, and to me, and to us together.

Today, All Saints Day, is an auspicious day to begin our ministry together. We have a cloud of witnesses present with us, parishioners past and present, loved ones past and present. They are with us always, of course, but today more in the forefront of our minds.

Our official Episcopal cloud of witnesses is larger now with the addition of several new saints to our commemorations. They are Harriet Bedell, James Theodore Holly, Oscar Romero and the martyrs of El Salvador, Tikhon, Vida Dutton Scudder and Frances Joseph Gaudet. As you may know, in the Episcopal church our notion of Saints is a little different than that of the Roman Church.

The people whom we remember as holy and commendable are ones that we have all chosen through our democratic form of church governance, the General Convention. Our prayer book lists good men and women whom we commemorate, from the early church up until 1979 when our latest prayer book was published. And at many subsequent General Conventions a few more are added to our commemorations. Because of the Convention just held in California this summer, we have new people who I'm looking forward to learning about and sharing with you in the weeks and months to come.

Looking at our readings from scripture for today, our lesson from Isaiah, our psalm and our NT reading from Revelation are joyous, reflecting the happiness that we have when celebrating the saints of our faith who stood firm, who may have suffered much, but who all gave us

wonderful examples of living in the glory of God through thick and thin, and reaching their reward in heaven. The readings are a celebration of the glory of God, shining through the saints.

But then the mood changes radically in the Gospel reading from John. Mary laments and says to Jesus in an almost accusatory tone, “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.” We’re sort of snapped back to reality of our world when we hear Mary’s anguish and grief. Lazarus is dead.

In the past our three year cycle of lectionary has always had us reading the beatitudes on All Saints Day. This is the first time I have ever heard, let alone preached on the story of Lazarus on All Saints Day. And at first glance this seems like an odd choice. Lazarus doesn’t appear to have any saintly qualities that we should be emulating. John’s Gospel doesn’t tell us anything at all about the man. All we know is that his sisters loved him and he is dead. Mary and Martha are grieving, and they think Jesus has arrived too late to do anything about it. None of the characters in the story can imagine that God can do anything to change this course of events. Death is, after all, final. Mary believes that Jesus could have done something but now it is too late. The onlookers also say that they know how powerful the signs of Jesus have been, he gave sight to the blind, but keeping one **from** dying is as far as their imagination can go. And then Martha, wishing to avoid a futile and grim scene, reminds Jesus that Lazarus has been dead long enough to create a stench. Surely, this is something that even Jesus cannot miraculously change.

Our loved ones for whom we will pray in a few minutes have died as well. The saints who we remember and honor have died. We know that, at some point in time, our lives will end. This is a difficult text to hear especially for an All Saints celebration. The big question it brings to our minds is the most obvious one: Does Jesus actually raise a stinking corpse from the dead?

But it is not about the corpse. This is a story from John's Gospel – this is John's way of talking about the power of God to raise us from the dead. Through Lazarus, Jesus shows us that God's power can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine....because Jesus **is** resurrection and life, and can bring life to us, both on this side of the grave, and the other side of the grave if we will let him. It is life, not death that has the ultimate power over us because we are in Christ. We must read this story with Spiritual eyes, and not our "prove it to me" eyes.

Jesus cried with a loud voice, "**Lazarus, come out!**" Hang on to those words instead of hanging onto the strips of cloth that were the grave clothes.

Life is where it's at. Even in death, or what seems like death to us, it is life that Jesus gives to us. Christ still yells loud enough to be heard through a tombstone, loud enough to be heard through the centuries, loud enough to be heard through the thick stone walls of our beautiful church, "**Come out!**" So, when we celebrate the lives of the saints, and the lives of those people who are saints to us, we do not grieve for them because they have died, we celebrate their lives because Jesus called to them, "**Come out!**" and they answered. They lived, and they live eternally.

I sometimes turn to a favorite book of mine written by Father Christopher Webber and Pastor Scott Cady. It is entitled *A Year with American Saints*. As Chris and Scott say, we are all God's saints. But theirs is a compilation of people from the whole spectrum of Christian faith who are not canonized, not commemorated, or notable as saints in the traditional sense. But they are people that lived life in its fullest sense.

One of those people is Robert Hunt. Hunt was an Anglican priest who came to America with the people who settled the Jamestown colony, the first continuing English settlement in the Western Hemisphere. He was their chaplain. He played a vital role in the community conducting services, offering communion, preaching sermons and working to resolve various conflicts. The first summer they were there he wrote:

“When I first went to Virginia, I well remember we did hang an awning (which is an old sail) to three or four trees to shadow us from the sun, our walls were rails of wood, our seats unhewed trees till we cut planks, our pulpit a bar of wood nailed to two neighbouring trees.”¹

Robert and the rest of the colonists were not all that well prepared for the harsh conditions they faced in the New World, though. A hundred hopeful men, women and children had arrived in Virginia in May of 1607, but by the end of that year almost half had died. The colonists faced diseases like malaria and dysentery, starvation, and bone-chilling cold. On top of all that, there were emotionally charged conflicts over leadership. It was a death-like situation if there ever was one; misery, hopelessness, bickering and anger, and physical suffering. We can imagine some of the colonists lamenting that they ever came to the New World. They must have asked Chaplain Hunt why Jesus had deserted them, and had left them comfortless in their new home.

When winter came, they made a mighty effort to build a homely chapel. But in the bitter cold of January a fire burned down the church, storehouse and palisade. All of Hunt’s books, clothing and other possessions perished in the flames yet he continued to hold services and preach until he could not speak. Robert died a short time later of an unidentified illness.

But what he gave to the suffering people of Jamestown was an understanding of the life that Jesus holds out for us. They said of him, “We all loved him for his exceeding goodness.” He helped them live life instead of seeing only death. And Jamestown did indeed survive that winter and the next. Frankly, it may have been Hunt’s little band, and not the Puritans that celebrated the first Thanksgiving. Hunt and his Anglican flock celebrated the Eucharist in their new home once a month, not in the midst of plenty at a first harvest, but in the midst of nothing or very little to eat – celebrating life in the face of death!

¹ Cady and Webber, *A Year with American Saints*

Our lives are infinitely easier than the lives of those colonists in Jamestown. But we have a tendency to let our troubles, fears, and resentments lead us to a death too – a death of our souls. If we are not careful, our lives can become sorrowful, small, and angry. We must not let ourselves fall prey to the dismay that Martha and Mary felt as they spoke to Jesus about the death of their brother. Through the story of Lazarus Jesus speaks two words to you and me today. **Come out!** Jesus calls us to wake up! Live the life of the living and not the dead and let go of the things that bring death.

In a little while when we come forward for communion, we will all have an opportunity to call to mind and pray for the souls of all those who are saints to us as we light a candle and float it in our baptismal font. The light is a symbol of the life that our loved ones lived and live still in Christ eternally. The water and the font are symbols for us that it is through our baptism that we have been joined with Christ. We have been given grace upon grace. We can turn from death and remember that we have been washed in the water of life. And God said to the Israelites long ago and repeats again and again, **“I set before you this day life and death. Choose life.”** (~ Deut. 30:19)