

. . . AND THE OMEGA

A Sermon for the Festival of All Saints (Year B), November 1, 2009

Text: John 11:32-44 (with references to Revelation 21:5-6)

Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha . . . and the Omega, the beginning and the end."

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

In the first half of his Gospel, John the Evangelist chose to tell at some length about seven signs Jesus had performed, beginning with changing water into wine at Cana in Galilee. He healed an official's son at Cana, cured a paralytic at the pool of Bethesda, multiplied the loaves in Galilee, walked on the sea of Galilee, cured a blind man in Jerusalem, and then . . .

#7: He raised Lazarus from the dead, at Bethany.

John means for us to hear this story as a sort of culmination of the other signs, which all pointed to Jesus' glory. When Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead and given him back to his family, the opponents of Jesus decided this miracle was finally too much. Now they really *had* to kill Jesus, because otherwise, as one of them said, "Now the whole world will run after him."

It is as if John were trying to help us see just *how* good the Good News about Jesus is. Starting with something small—they ran out of wine at Cana. Leading up to something so big that they couldn't even imagine he could do anything about it.

They would have understood if Jesus had *healed* Lazarus, if he had "kept him from dying," as some of them said in verse 37. "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" But they didn't dream of asking Jesus to bring Lazarus back to them. It was too late. John heightens this tension by having Martha say, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days."

Didn't they know about Isaiah 25?

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

⁷And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;

⁸*he will swallow up death forever.*

Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the LORD has spoken.

⁹It will be said on that day,

Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.

This is the LORD for whom we have waited;

let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Did they not believe that the Lord of hosts would do as he had promised, and destroy death, the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations?

Did they believe that the Lord God would wipe away the tears from *most*, but not all faces? Were they guilty of placing limits on God?

In the middle of writing this sermon, I received an email from our daughter Martha. She said, "My friend's husband was working under his car when the jack slipped out and he was killed. His wife pulled up in her car with their two little kids and found him, tried CPR but he was gone. It is so horrifically sad I am at a total loss for words. They are my age and went to Gustavus Adolphus. She is a local chiropractor I have come to know through teaching Bradley and through a few mutual friends."

I felt Martha's hurt. And it was not just the hurt of somebody losing someone. It was complicated by the thoughts we usually have around people's death, of needing somehow to find a way to put right, either through words or deeds, what has gone wrong, if at all possible. Has the person had "enough" life? Has their life been "good enough" or "full enough"? Was their death meaningful? Did it do anyone else some good? How much suffering should one expect? How much life does one deserve?

When Jesus stood with Mary and Martha in Bethany, I think the thoughts swirling around them were not so different from what our daughter and her friends are worrying over. *How could this death be anything but a terrible wrong?*

Jesus did not offer a pat answer to Mary and Martha. But what he showed by his words and actions that sad day in Bethany pointed to something about God, which we may believe . . . or not. He said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"

And by "the glory of God" he did not mean that they would see a spectacle that would impress them. He meant that they would see *that God glories in being full of mercy towards his children.*

Mary and Martha, four days earlier, had suffered a loss that shattered their household. Their beloved brother Lazarus had died after an illness. They had sent for Jesus, and when he didn't come Lazarus had died. Then, they stopped waiting for Jesus. But he came anyway.

Jesus was teaching his disciples to trust in God with all their heart and mind and soul and strength. They were learning. But there did seem to be a point at which one could no longer count on God. Even God could do nothing about death. Which seemed wrong, but there you were. Life has its problems, and then you die.

Standing with Mary and Martha in Bethany, Jesus wept. For their predicament, and for ours. That we should live with death acting as a lid on us, a shroud over us. That we should think that the creator had left it up to us to make everything as good as we could; to make things as right as possible, to be adamant on being paid for everything, to insist on revenge, to climb over others, and to fight what would always, eventually, be a losing battle, against the last worst enemy.

And Jesus said, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and his feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go!"

Which is to say that the Lord who created us in love in a past so far away we can't remember it, is Lord *even over death*. The Alpha is also the Omega. "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory *forever and ever*."

If that were not good enough, John turns the page and begins the second half of his Gospel, in which there is really only one sign. The glory of God is revealed there in the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ.

If I were God, I am not so sure I would want to take credit for Omega. I might settle for being the watchmaker who set this fantastic world in motion . . . and let *people* take credit for the unbelievable disasters they have set in motion. People killed more than one hundred million people in wars, genocides, and other atrocious great events during the twentieth century. That's a very rough count, a modest estimate. Who could begin to count the single murders, plus all the other hurts, the deliberate kind that ruin people's days, destroy their reputations. Frauds committed on the elderly. Abuse suffered by the children.

We live, not at the beginning or at the end, but in the middle. Every so often we see intimations of how great is the love of the God who created us, and all things. And here, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for us, we hear it said that the love of the God who created us and all things is a love that will not die. "I am the alpha *and* the omega, the beginning *and* the end," says the Lord of love. And Jesus clarifies, "I am right there in the middle with you, always, until the end of the age."

To the love of that Lord, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend all those friends we remember with love—Bob Grubbs, Cleona Kruse, Dorothy Martin, Annie Schneider, Betty Wert—and I invite you now to name others who have died in the Lord . . .

In hope of the resurrection to life eternal, we confess our faith in the God of love and mercy who is alpha . . . *and* omega.

Amen.