

Life. Death. Life
John 11:17-44
Center Church, Hartford
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!Presente! In many Latin American countries, this word is shouted when the name of someone who has died in struggle or is considered a hero or a "Saint" is mentioned. Presente! It means what it sounds like: present. They are here. Yes, they are dead, but the lives they lived had such a powerful impact on those who are still alive, that their spirit lives on though their bodies are, sadly, no longer alive. Their death is not denied in this word, but this word acknowledges that we are more than bodies. Presente!

In the story we just heard from John's gospel, Lazarus indeed experiences a bodily resurrection. He's not just present in spirit, but Jesus calls on them to open the tomb (although, as Martha says, decomposition would have begun and that body would be smelly. You gotta love Martha.) Jesus calls Lazarus to come out. Like one of those Mummy movies, Lazarus walks out in the cloths which bound spices around his body for burial. Jesus tells them to "unbind him," take off the cloth so he can reclaim the power of bodily life and move again in the world of the flesh. Joy overwhelms Mary and Martha as they embrace their brother, once again alive in their midst.

How many of us would wish this to happen for those we love who have died? Or for those whose deaths have been unjust or tragic? The children and teachers of Sandy Hook. The Bible Study members at Mother Emmanuel Church. The worshippers at Tree of Life synagogue. And more.

The expectations we can have are not like Mary and Martha's. We are given one precious life: whether for the few breaths of a child who dies at birth or the long days of someone who dies at 100

years, we have some time to love and be loved. Time to make the most of. Time to live. And then we die. As do those we love.

But perhaps in this story, Lazarus does not stand for our beloved who have died. Perhaps he stands for the ways **we** are bound by anything that keeps us from living fully into the life God hopes for us! Perhaps it is not our ancestors that need to be raised. Perhaps it is us.

On All Saint's Day, and especially in the presence of the Bread and Cup of Holy Communion, we proclaim that there is a power, a **life**, that continues after death. And that those who have died bring that life into the world for and with us, and to make us more alive in whatever time we have.

Yes, the dead have eternal life in heaven, with God, in the afterlife, whatever word you want to use. I do not know what that looks like, feels like, tastes like, smells like or sounds like, though I do know that most of the imagery for it in scripture involves food!

But that's not what I'm talking about. It's the power of the spirit that transcends death. And I'm not talking about the experiences people have with seeing birds or butterflies or sensing the presence of one lost. I do not discount those experiences, and I'm glad for folk that find comfort in them, but I mean something more.

When our Latinx kin shout "presente!" they are proclaiming that the beloved, heroic, dead are **here**. That because this is true, there is a power to be accessed by the living that can encourage, encourage, inspire, literally add breath to, us NOW, so that we can run the race set before us with passion as they ran their races. We all stand on someone's shoulders, as my African American sisters often say, and those shoulders are real to us as though the people who once inhabited them were alive.

When we celebrate Holy Communion, we proclaim this about Jesus, and that is special, a very powerful presence beyond any of our other ancestors. We say that in some mysterious way, Jesus is **real**

to us, in us and through us as we eat this meal together. That's not just a Catholic thing; John Calvin spoke about this mystery. We are invited to open ourselves to the possibility of Jesus living in us, not as some alien parasite, but renewing the spark of the spirit of God put in all human life from the beginning.

The value of a day like this one, when we remember those others who have died, is that in addition to the cosmic spirit power of Jesus, we also, by remembering them into the present, can stand on the shoulders, can feel the spirit, of anyone who has been powerful in our lives and is now dead. We can't bring them out of their tombs. We **can** access once again the strength, wisdom, courage and hope they instilled in us so we can walk out of whatever might entomb us. We can shout Presente!, and suddenly they are with us and we are made new, unbound. Doubly, today, because of Jesus.

I don't know about you, but I need all the power, courage, life and hope I can get these days. So, on this All Saints Sunday, I invite you to join me for a few moments of spirit empowerment. Let us take a moment now to remember those who have died who made a difference for good in our lives or in the world. (Silence). Now say their names aloud, and after each name you say, shout Presente! And I encourage you to shout and not just whisper, because you need to convince yourself that they are with you! Presente! (name names)

"Therefore, beloved, surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also unbind the cloths of death that would hold us back, and let us run with perseverance and joy the race that is set before us!"
(Hebrews 12:1, revised)

Thanks be to God. Amen.