Day of the Dead

TEXT: John 19:38-42

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on October 29, 2023

Death and resurrection are the center of Christian faith and are two sides of the same coin. The message of resurrection is essential to the joy and hope that we share. But that message can become a platitude rather than the Gospel, if we ignore the death side of the coin—which we are quite good at doing.

The Christian calendar does its best to urge us to face the dragon of our demise. We have Ash Wednesday to specifically remember our mortality, followed by six full weeks of Lent, when we are invited to use the harsh desert of that realization to consider whether and how our lives might change in response. And those six weeks march us straight up the hill called Mt. Calvary to bear witness to the brutal execution of an innocent man on Good Friday. But there are other such points on the calendar, too.

Starting in the 8th century, the church set aside three days in the fall to remember death's impact, honor the dead, and integrate those losses both as individuals and as a community. The three days are October 31 – November 2 and came to be called the Season of AllHallowtide. The center of the season is November 1, All Saints Day or All Hallows. That was the day the church set aside to remember those who gave their lives in exceptional service to the church as a body—those canonized as saints and those martyred for their faith, frequently an overlapping list.

On the eve of All Hallows, October 31, there was a vigil to prepare hearts and minds to honor the sacrifices of the saints and martyrs. The eve of All Hallows grew to be abbreviated in English as Hallow'een. The close of the season on November 2 was not All Saints but All Souls; the day that focused more on the very particular losses of friends and family, whether anyone had ever heard of them or not; whether they died after a long and fruitful life or whether they died suddenly or tragically in their prime or as infants.

Personally, I had never heard of All Souls' Day growing up. Protestants tend to ignore the saints and martyrs, move the remembrance of friends and family to All Saints and call it quits. It was only because my father died at midnight between All Saints and All Souls that our Catholic friends and relatives began talking about that significance. I had to look up All Souls to see what they were talking about.

And, of course, the culture in the United States has run away with All Hallow's Eve, very much keeping the focus on death but totally severing it from the religious significance of the days that followed. In the hands of our culture, Halloween became a time to use the symbols of death to frighten both ourselves and others, and in some quarters to actually threaten death or do emotional harm.

But instead of reclaiming All Hallow's Eve, many Protestant Churches now actually forbid their members from participating in Halloween activities.

In a practice I discovered during my time in Cross City, Florida; some churches set up a very different kind of scary house where they walk children through the scene of teenagers getting drunk, going out for a drive, and then being killed in a car crash. And because that's apparently not traumatizing enough, the children are then brought into a scene where they see those dead teens being tormented by demons in hell because they died without doing what that church believed was necessary to go to heaven. After all of that, the pastor comes out to convince the children to give their lives to Jesus. The whole thing was billed as "Hope House." I have found it in other places across my years in ministry, and it has been one of the most disturbing abuses of Christian faith I've witnessed.

For the Church, the purpose of facing death is not to learn to either fear it or desire it; but to learn to embrace it as a part of what it means to be human and to see it as the necessary precursor to resurrection. Life springs from death—it's built into every year as winter gives way to spring and in every time dead leaves turn into compost, which becomes rich soil, which gives birth to life. And yet our society can't even bear the sight of dead leaves on our lawn, let alone really face the passing of our loved ones. That's a problem for the church. It's literally impossible to preach a message of resurrection to a society that ignores the painful reality of death.

Which finally brings us around to this morning's crop of monsters—the skeletons, zombies, ghosts, and various other creatures from the crypt. We had a hall full of singing skeletons last night; and Randall gave us some poignant commentary in his Train of Zombies song this morning, encouraging us to think about the ways we can be—perhaps not dead, but not really living either.

But whether we outsource our lives to our phones or, quite soon, to myriad forms of artificial intelligence, we were outsourcing our dying long before technology presented us with options for outsourcing our living. We can't talk about resurrecting anything—not the church, not our society, not even ourselves—until we can find a way to live our lives and die our deaths, with purpose, honor, and love. But how?

As a former Baptist, one of the things I struggled with in seminary was figuring out what ritual was for. Ritual was one of the things many Protestant traditions threw out with the Catholic bathwater in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, the Baptists among them. I grew up giving a side-eye to even the simplest of rituals—responsive readings, public prayers. How could I pray the prayers of others? And how could my own prayers be said in public when Jesus said go into your closet and close the door to pray? If we said or did something every single week, would it not lose its meaning? Would it just become rote? I didn't get it.

It was my Public Worship professor, Don Saliers, father of Indigo Girl Emily Saliers, who taught me the simple truth that ritual's purpose was to provide a way to approach the unapproachable. With that simple concept, everything fell into place.

By embodying our fears, a monster story can be a ritual that provides a safe way to approach the fear and explore what it might take to neutralize or, more frequently, to live with its threat. There is nothing more unapproachable than death, and I've come to believe that the scary creatures of the crypt who ritually appear in what is now a full season of Halloween, can open the door to our haunted hearts to help us approach the unapproachable. I think it's possible that we have so latched onto Halloween as a culture because of our need for exactly that.

One of the most terrifying things about the various undead creatures we encounter in games, movies, and haunted houses is that they can kill you, but you can't kill them—they're already dead. The inevitability of that—the monster that can't be stopped and from which we can't escape—is exactly the terror we run from in death.

We've been running for millennia, but we have never been so intentionally severed from the reality of dying as we are in the United States in the year of our Lord 2023.

The body heads straight to the funeral home where it is either sent off for cremation and not seen again until it has been reduced to ash or is embalmed and made to look as life-like as possible for a wake at a funeral home. Then it is buried in a metal or hardwood casket, which is itself put into a metal or concrete grave liner, all of which is frequently lowered into a cement vault with an interior liner of plastic, or steel with a water-resistant seal. I mean, tell me you're afraid of death without telling me you're afraid of death.

To actively prevent the dissolution of my body is, for me, a sacrilege. Let me be ash; let me be food; but let my body in death serve its God-ordained purpose to nourish life-giving soil. And don't even get me started on how bad those practices are for the earth. The issues aren't just with the burial, either. In many Christian quarters, the funeral is so focused on resurrection that it feels somehow lacking in faith to mention that someone has, in fact, died. The purpose of ritual is to help us approach the unapproachable, not to help us to avoid the unavoidable.

And the rest of society is no help. If you're working, you get a week, tops, to get over the loss of a loved one, and if you're still struggling a month later, some will encourage you to get therapy—because, I mean, why aren't you over it already? So what if you were married 65 years and now the house is empty? So what if it was a child who met a tragic end? So what if it was your only remaining friend in the world? The message from all corners is to deny, avoid, and distance ourselves from death; and the expectation is that such distance will block its ability to affect us for more than a day or two. Wrong on all counts.

According to Investopedia, Halloween is the second-biggest retail holiday in the US, behind only Christmas. In 2021, as Covid still raged, we spent a record $10.1 billion dollars on Halloween. No doubt there are many things that factor into that spending; but I bet you could draw matching charts for what we have spent on avoiding contact with actual death with what we have spent to be surrounded and spooked by its symbols on Halloween.

As we think about how we might put the zombies, ghosts, and skeletons of Halloween to work in bringing us to a healthier relationship with death, I think we can find some clues by looking at the tradition that grew up around that same Allhallowtide season just south of our border in Mexico.

Día de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead, gives us two days where skeletons are the coin of the realm and the dead are front and center. But, unlike our Halloween, the Day of the Dead celebrations still have as their central purpose the memory of those who have died, often combined with some fun in thinking about our own mortality. People dress and paint their faces as skeletons not to frighten, but to remember. We smear dust on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday to remember that dust we are and to dust we shall return. Those celebrating Day of the Dead take the human skull we all have on the inside and bring it to the outside.

The dead are remembered with stories about their lives, and spirit altars are built and filled with flowers and food, sometimes a cross, as a central focus for the storytelling. The items on those altars typically represent favorite things of the deceased. Neil has prepared a Spirit Altar here this morning, designed to honor the memory of those innocents gunned down in Lewiston, Maine Thursday night. So, if the bishop is watching, that's why there is beer on our altar this morning—remembering those killed in a bar. And a bowling ball for those killed in the bowling alley.

A good Christian celebration does this, too, and is a ritual in a healthy funeral that can help the family and friends of the deceased approach the unapproachable. A difference is that in the Day of the Dead celebrations, the food and drink are shared with the dead as well as the living. Death is also faced by writing light-hearted epigraphs for those still living—a ritual that allows us to approach and think about how others might remember us when we're gone; and maybe to quit worrying quite so much about our legacy.

There are somber remembrances and processions, too, as there should be. But I'm not trying to argue for more light-hearted funerals. I'm trying to argue for rituals that help us use the fake death we put on with a skeleton costume or stand up in our yard to approach the fear of our own inevitable demise.

What if we could ritually connect our creatures of the crypt to the fate we all share, and do so with honor, love, and a bit of fun? If we could make death a bit more approachable, maybe we wouldn't need to create so much of it. Maybe we might find the courage to actually live our lives and not outsource it to a train of zombies. Maybe we could turn our swords into ploughshares and our guns into candy skulls.

What I learned about ritual in seminary is that when people complain about empty ritual, the problem is not the ritual, but the emptiness. The best rituals enact a drama that is infused with the fundamental issues of life. The more fraught and difficult the issue, the better suited it is for a ritual that gives us some symbolic way to approach the otherwise unapproachable. To be sure, the content of those rituals should be crafted with care. But, just like a picture can be worth a thousand words, a well-crafted ritual can be worth a thousand visits with a therapist or a thousand sermons.

We already have a tradition of remembering the dead that has been baked into church liturgy and practice for over a thousand years. We have a culture that has turned the symbols of death into a multi-billion-dollar industry, celebrated with abundant rituals, as the creatures from the crypt and the heroes who defeat them wander our streets from house to house the night before.

We have a tradition from our southern neighbors that remembers the ancient connection of the dead to the living; and the concrete ways that leaning into the fact of dying honors the dead even as it comforts the living. We have a faith whose joyous message of resurrection can't be faithfully proclaimed unless someone has actually died.

Is it possible they can all go together? Is it possible that a healthier approach to death might help stop the killing? I think it's worth a try.

Amen.