

Sermon at St. Thomas by Lynn Cunningham. November 4, 2007. All Saints day celebration.

1. Today the church celebrates All Saints Day. The day actually fell on November 1, 2007. But, like many churches, we are celebrating this day on the Sunday closest to the first of November.
2. The celebration inevitably brings to mind the affirmation in the creeds, that we believe in the resurrection of the body, or, as the Nicene Creed states, in the resurrection of the dead.
3. And during the prayers of the people today, the congregation is invited to remember by name those who have passed on.
4. What do we remember with these names? What do we have to look forward to?
5. Looking far back in history, belief in the resurrection was a very early part of the church's understanding of what happened in Jesus Christ's coming.
6. On Wednesday morning of this week, Halloween, we celebrated the life of a long time member of this church, Pauline Darnall, with a funeral service, followed by her interment at the Dubois cemetery next to the grave of her late husband Walter (?) Darnall.
7. When her daughter, Sandra Eller, who lives over in Worland, called me, she paused for a few moments when planning the service over the idea of holding a funeral service for her mother on Halloween, but she decided to proceed.
8. Death has a powerful hold over all of us, and inevitably one wonders what happens to a person after death.
9. I went over to the Headwaters in the evening on Halloween, where there was a wonderful party for the pre-teen crowd of Dubois, and their parents. The party was a child's dream of celebration and fun. The main room was filled with games, and food, including smoking witches' brews to drink. Lots and lots of children were decked out in the most outlandish costumes. Chandler's Restaurant, the main sponsor of this most amazing event, deserves great praise and thanksgiving for helping put this all together.
10. Death and what happens next seemed to be the most popular theme. I would say that nine out of ten costumes was either a skeleton, or some kind of ghastly and bloody human remains, or even an angel. I wondered whether the angel costume was some parent's wishful thinking. A few witches, and other creatures were thrown in for good measure. I am sure that Dick Hodge would have quipped that it was a haunting experience.
11. The fantasy of scary life after death, a world inhabited by goblins, ghoulies, ghosties, and things that go bump in the night is perhaps our society's most common shared images of what happens after death.
12. The Nicene and Apostle's creeds invite our understanding in a different direction. They invite an affirmation in the resurrection of the body, the resurrection of the dead.
13. For the past four weeks, a group of us have met to reflect on these and other beliefs in our study of Archbishop Rowan Williams' Introduction to Christian Belief. The main title of the book is, Tokens of Trust. The class will pick up again in December to go over the material some more, and all of you are very welcome to join us at noon on Wednesdays.
14. Rowan is not only the archbishop of Canterbury, and the international head of our church, but he is also a first rate theologian in his own right. What I am saying today is based on my understanding of what he is teaching.
15. Belief in the resurrection of our bodies goes so directly against what is commonly observed, that the affirmation in the creeds seems quite impossible. Indeed, it seemed impossible to many who lived at the time the creeds were written.
16. Physical decay of the body follows death. After someone has died, they are missed, and present in many ways in memory, like the famous men of old recalled in the passage from Ecclesiasticus, but they just cannot be reached any longer by telephone.
17. There are two ways to view the affirmation in the creeds about the resurrection. One is to say simply that those were old fashioned beliefs that are better simply ignored. In other words, one easy thing to say about the belief in the resurrection of the body, is just forget about it. But, and here Rowan is nicely challenging, instead of just striking these lines

- out of the creeds, let's ask what reality the creeds were trying to get at?
18. Rowan invites his readers to back up and look again at what you and I know and believe about God. The statement in the creeds comes from the earliest church understandings about the nature of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, not from common observations about the normal decay of human bodies after death.
  19. What is there about God to keep in mind here? First, God is the Maker of heaven and earth, as I pointed out in my sermon two weeks ago, and as Mary Ellen said last week in her sermon based on some alleged passages from the Dead Sea Scrolls, passages she read to the congregation about God creating dog and cat as appropriate companions for humans.
  20. Second, God breathed life into the first two humans at the beginning, and still does today. As Rowan puts it, Christ is the atmosphere in which humans live, and move, and have their being.
  21. Third, God is always about bringing new possibilities, new realities into any situation. Human beings are not robots where all actions and reactions are programmed and determined in advance. And the earth is not a dead planet where not much ever happens. God is in that aspect of people's lives where there are always new possibilities developing in the present. Think about any situation where you have been caught up in recently, and then remember how, whatever you thought about that situation, and how hopeless it may have seemed, things always moved on, and some things new and unexpected developed. That something new is Christ in action in the world. In short, God continues as Creator of heaven and earth in the present.
  22. Fourth, God creates man – humans – in God's own image, and each person has a unique gift as a child of God. There are no standard issue, fixed type of human beings. Every human being brings a special and unique gift into the world, and God created each person that way. In that sense each person brings their own unique special spark of the divine creativity, such as the persons described in the Beatitudes we just heard again today.
  23. That spark in each person is a living thing and is not something that is simply thrown away at a person's death.
  24. As some of my spiritual teachers taught me, God does not create trash, or, in the vernacular, God don't make no trash. God does not make human trash to be just thrown away.
  25. Something about the nature of each created human individual is divine, sacred, holy, and unique. So unique and important is that divine gift in each person that, when a person dies, that something is of a nature that God does not allow ever to be lost. That is an aspect of who God is.
  26. Fifth, Christianity takes the body and the relation between the body and a person with complete honor and respect, and some aspect of each person's human uniqueness is the particular body of a person. God created us bodies, not just spirits living in bodies that can be thrown away at death.
  27. It is not given to us to know exactly what happens after death but the divine spark in each person, and that physical body aspect of a person is not something that God simply throws away at death.
  28. So, again, a kind of choice is presented for understanding what happens at a person's death. On the one hand, the common knowledge is that all animal bodies, and we have animal bodies, decay into dust after death, and so, the belief in the resurrection of the body seems silly.
  29. On the other hand, remembering what is known about God and God's relationship to his human creatures, the resurrection of the body is much closer to reality.
  30. Neither Rowan, nor the Bible, nor the creeds say how such a bodily resurrection takes place in practical terms. Perhaps St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians comes closest. But the early church reached this firm conclusion about what to believe about resurrection

- from what it had learned about God from Jesus.
31. My own oldest brother, Jay, went back to the hospital on Friday and is there this morning. This may or may not be his time to die. Those of us who are close to him are all on edge knowing that we may lose him soon, so I am not preaching this message to you in the abstract.
  32. I know that several of you are going through a similar situation with your brothers or sisters, or parents, or closest ones.
  33. This morning during the prayers of the people, the congregation will be invited to name those who have passed on, and whose lives we remember.
  34. Before each person here is the choice faced in the presence of dying. Will God again offer new possibilities, new life beyond the death of family members and friends? Or is that death the simply the complete end of life, except for the memories?
  35. Let us all remember how deeply God loves each person whom God has created. I ask the Holy Spirit to awaken your understanding of that affirmation in the creeds, that we believe in the resurrection of the dead, and find comfort.
  36. In Jesus' name. Amen.