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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

November 7, 2021

Year B, Proper 24, Track 2, Revised Common Lectionary

[Isaiah 25:6-9](#)

[Psalm 24](#)

[Revelation 21:1-6a](#)

[John 11:32-44](#)

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will destroy the shroud cast over all peoples, the sheet spread over all nations; God will swallow up death forever.

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I remember being perhaps nine or ten and watching a TV show with my parents. There was a scene with a car crash, and someone had died. There was a moment where a paramedic came over and wordlessly pulled a sheet up over the person's face. And even as a kid, not sure exactly what was going on in this TV show, I understood what that meant.

There's an instinct to cover our dead. It's an ancient instinct, born of practicality and reverence at the same time: respect for the dignity of the dead person, and perhaps also a kind of humility or awe at the unsettling mystery of death. So some kind of shroud or wrappings are part of many different cultures' way of caring for the dead. Our imagery of Halloween relies on burial wrappings, from the long cloth strips of the mummy to the billowing white sheet of the ghost.

“Lazarus: come out!” Jesus cries, and the dead man hears, and rises, and answers the call. And as he lurches out of the tomb, his shroud and wrappings hold him back, his hands and feet still tangled up, his face covered, as if the forces of death are still trying to keep hold of him, and then Jesus gives another command: “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Jesus, the one whose command can overcome the power of death itself. And what he does for Lazarus on this day is only a foretaste. Soon Jesus himself will lie beneath his own burial shroud, captured by the powers of death. Yet on Easter morning, the gospels tell us, the disciples found it lying rolled up in the tomb. Somehow, in the mystery of that holy night, Jesus took off his burial shroud and put on immortality.

We come together each week to celebrate a liturgy that puts us directly in touch with the deep mystery of life and death. We do this in remembrance of someone who scripture calls the firstfruits of those who have died: the one who has passed through death and is the Lord of what God has in store for us after death. We have so little idea of what that is that we can only talk about it in pictures: the prophet Isaiah’s rich feast on the holy mountain; the book of Revelation’s picture of the holy city, a new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. In a few minutes when we renew our baptismal covenant we will proclaim the Apostles’ Creed, which says we believe in that very mysterious phrase, the “resurrection of the body.” St. Paul uses the analogy of a seed and a plant: the risen identity that is to come is continuous with the physical people we are now, just as a plant is continuous with a seed and yet also different altogether.

Now St. Paul had seen the risen Jesus—and yet he never describes what he saw; he can only resort to this language of poetry and mystery; the reality is too great for simple visual description. But he knows that it is Jesus whom he saw: the one who has passed through death and out the other side, and who holds our own destiny in his loving hands.

The dead will be raised, says Paul, and we will be changed: this perishable body will put on imperishability; this mortal body will put on immortality like a garment.

At Christian funerals we drape the caskets of our loved ones with a special kind of shroud: the plain white pall that recalls the white robe in which we clothe the newly baptized. When we are baptized we really and truly “put on Christ.” And when we die, we carry that garment with us. So, for Christians, even the very shroud we wear in death is a token of the garment of immortality. God will transform our burial shroud into the heavenly wedding robe. And we will put it on when the trumpet sounds, to wake us into new and life, and to call us to the great banquet.

Today is the feast of All Saints, all those who rejoice with Jesus at that banquet: the heroes of the faith, those whose names we celebrate and whose feast days we keep; and also those whose names are known to God alone. We are one with them in our baptism, for we with them have put on Christ.

And now we live by faith; but in the resurrection of Jesus we have God’s pledge that there is yet more to come. On that day the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast, an abundant feast that never ends. But even now we have a foretaste of that feast of rich food, of well-aged wines strained clear.