

**Revelation 21:1-6** (NRSV) *The New Heaven and the New Earth*

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home<sup>[a]</sup> of God is among mortals.

He will dwell<sup>[b]</sup> with them;

they will be his peoples,<sup>[c]</sup>

and God himself will be with them;<sup>[d]</sup>

<sup>4</sup> he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.”

<sup>5</sup> And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” <sup>6</sup> Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

**John 11:32-44** (NRSV)

<sup>32</sup> When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” <sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. <sup>34</sup> He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” <sup>35</sup> Jesus began to weep. <sup>36</sup> So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” <sup>37</sup> But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

<sup>38</sup> Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. <sup>39</sup> Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” <sup>40</sup> Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” <sup>41</sup> So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup> I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” <sup>43</sup> When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” <sup>44</sup> The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”



**UNBOUND AND FREE**

Are you living in the land of “If only”? “If only he hadn’t died.” “If only she hadn’t left.” “If only I had made a different decision.” “If only I had not said that.” “If only I had not done that.” “If only things were like they used to be.”

I suspect all of us have, at some point, lived in the land of “if only”! It could be about anything: our schools, our community, our church, our nation, our family, our children, our selves. Ultimately, though, it is about the past. We want to preserve what was and keep things the way they’ve always been. *We want to undo what is and go back to what was.* Sometimes the words “if only” betray our attachment to the past, our dislike of what is, or our fear of something new. Almost always they come from a place of sorrow and loss, regret, perceived failure, or disappointment.

The illusion of “if only” wraps around our lives like grave clothes. We use it to try to bind up what has fallen apart, preserve what is decaying, and tie us to what has been lost. If you know the illusion of “if only,” then you probably know about Mary and her sister, Martha.

By the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus has been in the tomb four days. His hands and feet are bound with strips of cloth. His face is wrapped in cloth. According to Martha, he’s not just dead, he’s stinky dead, hopeless dead, beyond help dead. For all good Jews knew that the human spirit only remained close to the lifeless body for three days. Mary is weeping, along with the other Jews.

Mary’s first words to Jesus are, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” They are the same words that Martha had spoken to Jesus earlier. Some of the Jews ask, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” Everyone wants Jesus to turn back time, to preserve the past, and maintain what was. If only Jesus had been there!

They, however, **misunderstand** Jesus’ mission. They are trying to recover and preserve the past. To the extent that we try to recreate the past, we too, misunderstand. Jesus is not the curator of our past. Jesus is the creator, the bringer, the innovator, the giver of NEW LIFE. He is the one who “is making all things new.”

Every death, loss, disappointment, and failure is a passing away that reveals new life. Every tear cried is a tear God wipes away. Every “if only” is a place in which Christ is making all things new. Whatever the circumstances of your life might be, they are being made new by Christ.

We no longer have to seek the OLD heaven and earth. A NEW heaven and earth, a new Jerusalem, and a new life are being given to us. That means, however, that we must UNBIND the past and let it go! Unbinding and letting go of the past are not a rejection, but an offering. ***We do not reject the past, throw it away, or deny its value and importance to us.*** Instead, we free it to be made new, to be given new life, to become a new creation. In so doing, we discover that we too have been freed, we too have been given new life, we too have become a new creation. That is the celebration and gift on this All Saints Sunday. It takes amazing love and faith to let go of a past that was formative, nurturing, and life-giving in it’s time. But we are called to let go so that the Author of Love can create for us a new, life-giving freedom filled with joy.

The saints are ones who were willing to unbind and let go. They trusted the new creation of Christ more than they did the circumstances of their past. They did not look to the past but to what might be. They refused to live an “if only” life. ***They are our witnesses that it is safe to die, that passing away, in whatever form it might take, is not an ending***

***but a beginning.*** The saints guide, companion, and pray for us in our unbinding and letting go. The saints encourage and support us in becoming a new creation.

A couple of months ago, I was struck by the poignant words of a lesser known poem by poet laureate, Maya Angelou, titled, "Touched by an Angel." She writes:

We, unaccustomed to courage  
exiles from delight  
live coiled in shells of loneliness  
until love leaves its high holy temple  
and comes into our sight  
to liberate us into life.

Love arrives  
and in its train come ecstasies  
old memories of pleasure  
ancient histories of pain.  
Yet if we are bold,  
love strikes away the chains of fear  
from our souls.

We are weaned from our timidity.  
In the flush of love's light  
we dare be brave  
And suddenly we see  
that love costs all we are  
and will ever be.  
Yet it is only love  
which sets us free.

In just a few moments we will light candles for our dear departed ones. Through our tithes and offerings, we will express our gratitude for love which sets us free to be a new creation in Christ. And, we will gather at the table of Christ's grace, bringing our worship celebration full circle. For by letting go of our sinful past, and accepting Christ's grace, we are unbound and set free by love. ***It is only LOVE which sets us free!*** Amen.