
Take Away the Stone – The Rev. Rhett Solomon

A sermon by the Rev. Rhett Solomon
The Homeless Requiem

In the Name of the ever-present God
who comes to us unbidden,
who for our lives was broken,
and in whose Spirit we are guided
into wholeness and holiness of life. *Amen.*

† † †

Unable to hold back his tears,
greatly disturbed in spirit, Jesus says,
“Take away the stone.” Take away the stone.
Four words.
That reveal how Jesus meets us
amid the tang and sting of death. Take away the stone.
Four words.
That show us how we are called to remember
our unhoused siblings who have died in the past year.
“Take away the stone.”

† † †

Our Gospel tells us that, at the tomb of Lazarus,
Jesus began to weep.
So heartbroken, so riven with grief, was he
that Jesus began to sob bitter tears.
And yet, and yet, Jesus did not weep only for Lazarus.
Jesus wept for us. For them.
For those whom we remember this evening.
Jesus weeps for us still.
Because Jesus’ love for Lazarus, for us,
for those whom we love and see no longer, is real.
Beloved, our Gospel reveals that,
amid the reality of death and death-dealing modalities,
Jesus meets us as one who grieves,
as one who weeps bitter tears for us
and for our unhoused siblings who have died this past year
on streets and in alleyways,
in shelters and transitional facilities,
under bridges and even under the awnings of our churches.
Jesus meets us as one who grieves,
as the one who sanctifies our grief.

† † †

Now, as then, grief-stricken, with tear-stained face, Jesus bids us,
"Take away the stone."
For here, now, always, God's work must surely be our own.
Here, now, always, if there is to be a miracle –
if there is to be a miracle, Beloved –
we must bend our backs and strain our muscles and heave . . .
and so play our little part.
Jesus says, "Take away the stone."
Because our engagement with death
must be personal, not philosophical,
actual, not abstract,
honest, not haughty.
Take away the stone.
And, we, like Martha and the rest of the crowd,
are overwhelmed by the stench of death:
the powerful and obnoxious odor of inadequate or no shelter;
the galling stink of sickness that stems from lacking access to
safe, sanitary, and affordable housing;
the mephitic fumes of a dubious, yawning
prison industrial complex;
the stubborn funk of our missteps and divisions,
our sins and self-doubts, our self-loathing and condemnation,
our apathy and hate.
Take away the stone.
We dare not look away.
We dare not turn up or cover our noses.
We dare not fail this rendezvous.
Take away the stone.
Take away the stone.
Take away the stone.

† † †

Beloved, when we take away the stone,
we make bold testimony –
we testify, in the words of Justin Welby,
former Archbishop of Canterbury,
that death is a liar.
Because, then we can remember
those whom we commend to God this evening,
just as Jesus remembered Lazarus . . .
by calling their names.
For when we call their names,
we affirm their beloved-ness, dignity, and sacred worth.
When we call their names,
we offer solemn prayers that they have not died in vain.
When we call their names,
defiantly do we profess that, while death closed their eyes,
death did not snatch them out of Jesus' hands and embrace.
When we call their names,
we proclaim, as Donne did, "everyone's death diminishes us,"
and as Elphaba did of Glinda,
"because we knew them, we have been changed for good."
When we take away the stone and call their names,
death surrenders to the person of Jesus.
Jesus, the one who stands toe-to-toe with death
Jesus, the one who, venturing to the cracks in our communities,
ushered the 41 siblings whose name we shall hear –
and so many more whose names are unknown to us –
into the communion of saints.

† † †

Beloved, take away the stone.
And see how thin the veil truly is.
See that, even though our beloved siblings
were not raised as Lazarus was, they are still with us.
See that they go, that we take them with us.
Because, maybe after all is said and done,
that is all the hope of resurrection, all the hope of glory, really is:
clinging, in life and in death, to those personal encounters
that changed us for good.

Amen.