

REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY

13 November 2022

John 11:21-27

In April of 1915, Major John McCrae was serving as a medical officer with the First Brigade of the Canadian Field Artillery, in the trenches near Ypres, Belgium; in the area traditionally called Flanders. We have shared, this morning, the poem that he wrote while there, in remembrance of the fallen. I want to share with you another writing from McCrae's time in Ypres; it is an excerpt from a letter written to his mother, describing his time in the trenches:

The general impression in my mind is of a nightmare. We have been in the most bitter of fights. For seventeen days and seventeen nights none of us have had our clothes off, nor our boots even, except occasionally. In all that time while I was awake, gunfire and rifle fire never ceased for sixty seconds...And behind it all was the constant background of sights of the dead, the wounded, the maimed, and a terrible anxiety lest the line should give way.¹

McCrae's letter captures, as well as words can, what the Psalmist expresses when praying: **"The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish,"** (Psalm 116:3). John McCrae did indeed suffer from great distress and anguish, but his walk through the valley of the shadow of death began long before he arrived in Flanders Fields.

As a student, the young woman that McCrae was in love with tragically died at the age of 18. His grief is expressed in his poetry from that time, which dwelt on the theme of death. In the years that followed, during his time as a resident physician, he worked at a convalescent home for sick children, many of whom were dying. Also, before his years of service in the Great War, he worked as a pathologist. So even before he arrived in Flanders fields, John McCrae had shared his life with many who had died prematurely.

When a person dies, in war, sudden illness, or by accident, we are shaken. Some surmise that this is because a premature death disrupts our sense of our own lives as being a narrative. Each of our lives is a story, and we find it incredibly difficult to wrap our heads around why some stories don't get the ending that we anticipate. We ask 'why?' and struggle with the seeming senselessness of it all.

For those of us who have faith in Jesus Christ, perhaps we find ourselves speaking to God something like the greeting that Jesus receives from Martha in our Gospel reading this morning: **"Lord if you had been here, he wouldn't have died."** Does she say to him, as we often do in moments of suffering, Lord, where are you? If you are here, how can you let this happen? Indeed, in our grief we may feel angry that the all-powerful God shows his love to us by letting terrible things happen.

¹ All John McCrae quotations are taken from Veterans Affairs Canada: [[John McCrae - Veterans Affairs Canada](#)]

The story of Lazarus dying is *not* a story where God lets anyone down. Death is not an indicator that God has failed. Indeed, earlier in the chapter, before our reading from today, Martha and Mary have sent word to Jesus that Lazarus, whom he loves, is gravely ill. What is Jesus' response? **"This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."** Furthermore, he remains where he is for two days longer.

It seems, in the short term at least, that the illness does lead to death. Lazarus dies, and Jesus arrives in Bethany after his body has been in the tomb for four days. So, Lazarus is definitely dead.

This is the context in which Martha meets Jesus in our reading today. Her greeting unquestionably recognizes his power. Her brother would not have died if Jesus had been here sooner. Furthermore, she confesses her belief that God will give Jesus whatever is asked for. She is confident in his ability to do miraculous things.

Friends, take note of this: Jesus responds to Martha by shifting her focus away from what he can accomplish to who he is: **I am the resurrection and the life.** Why is this important? Why must we trust not in what God can *do*, but in who God *is*?

Our hope is not found in a god who *can* give life to those who have died, but in Jesus Christ, who *will* give everlasting life. This Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, is the God of Israel who has kept every promise made to his people. You can trust in this promise of everlasting life. You can trust in his love.

What does this mean for those who we love, but see no longer; for those who have died tragically; what does this mean for us? It means that everything is going to be okay in the end, and if it's not okay, then it's not the end.

Lazarus' illness did indeed lead to God's glory, for he was raised. But guess what? As we have no account of his assumption, we must conclude that he died again, as did Martha and Mary, all beloved of Jesus. Is this the end of their story? For those who made the ultimate sacrifice for our freedom, is death in service the end of their story? For those whom we love, but see no longer, is the grave the end of their story? No, it is not. Death does not win; victory belongs to the Lord.

While we wait in this hope of everlasting life, living *this* life in the shadow of death, remember that Emmanuel, God with us, is with you now. John McCrae knew this. He recognized that God was present among the dying. In an essay about his pediatric patients, he wrote:

A kitten has taken up with a poor (child) dying of muscular atrophy who cannot move. It stays with him all the time, and sleeps most of the day in his straw hat. Tonight I saw the kitten curled up under the bedclothes. It seems as it were a gift of Providence that the little creature should attach itself to the child who needs it most.

A gift of Providence; divine action to comfort a child at the end of their life. God wants you to know this comfort today. May the peace of knowing that all shall be well be sealed to each of us. Amen.