

# WHEN GRAVESTONES SPEAK

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Revelation 7:9-17; 1 John 3: 1-3

November 2, 2008

(THE FESTIVAL OF ALL SAINTS)

**See what love the Father has given us that we should be called the children of God; and so we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he [it] is revealed, we will be like him, for we shall see him as he is.**

I read a story the other day about President Bush. It said he was swimming just off the beach somewhere in Texas. And all of a sudden, he got caught in an undertow. It just pulled him underwater. And in just a matter of seconds, he was well beyond the reach of the Secret Service men who were there with him. But luckily for him, some boys -- three young men -- were diving in the area. And they saw the president struggling and pulled him out of the water... It was one of those things they don't talk about in the weekly press conferences at the White House, I suppose.

But when it was all over and Mr. Bush was safe, he said, "Thank y'all..." (They say that down in Texas.) "Thank y'all so much for rescuing me," he said. "What can I ever do to repay you for saving my life?"

Well, one of the boys said, "I'd really like to go to West Point, sir." And the president said, "Are you a good student, son?" And the boy said, "Yes sir." And Mr. Bush said, "Well, I promise you I'll do everything in my power to see that you're accepted there."

And he looked at one of the other two boys and said, "What about you, son. What can I do for you?" And the kid said, "Well, it's always been my dream to go to Annapolis, Mr. President -- to the Naval Academy." And the President said, "Well, do you have the grades?" And the kid said, "Yes sir, I'm

at the top of my class.” And President Bush said, “I’ll get on it right away. I give you my word.”

And then he turned to the last kid and said, “Son, how can I repay you?”

“I’d like to be buried in Arlington Cemetery,” the boy said.

It caught the president a little off guard, I think. He looked at the young man and said, “Arlington Cemetery! You’re just a kid. Why in the world would you wish for that?” And the boy looked at “the leader of the free world,” wide-eyed and trembling. And he said, “Mr. President, sir, I just thought I’d ask. ‘Cause when my father finds out I saved your life ... he’s gonna *kill me!*” ✕

I was there, once, when I was seventeen. I was a senior in High School. And our group laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknowns, the Unknown *Soldier*, they called it then. And we got to see the changing of the guard, which was just amazing, I thought. One of the most impressive things I had ever seen. But then, the whole place was like that. It was so quiet, so beautiful, and so full of dignity and grace.

And there was a boy from our school whose father was killed in Viet Nam when he was no more than a toddler. And one of the senators made arrangements for someone to meet him there at Arlington. And they took Bud, the kid from my high school, to his father’s grave. And that day at Arlington Cemetery *did* something to Bud. He’d been headed for disaster. Running with the wrong crowd. Always getting into trouble. But seeing his father’s grave for the very first time and standing there before it was, for him, something like standing on holy ground. And it stirred something inside him that would never be the same. And it did something to me, too, though it wasn’t nearly so deep or as rich as it was for him. But it was almost as if the place could *speak*. As if there was a whisper there that spoke to something inside me. And it all had something to do with the *gravestones* at Arlington. Hundreds and hundreds of white gravestones standing with such dignity.

And *they were all the same*. Thousands of them, and yet they were the same. As if to say they are *all* heroes. The great ones, the small ones, little and large. First Class, Lieutenants, Captains, and Colonels.... They were heroes *all*. "*These honored dead*" is what Lincoln might have said about them. And so they are.... That is what they are.

**Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. "Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them."**

Some churchyards are like that, you know. Some of the really old ones are like Arlington, *in a way*. Because the gravestones are all the same. ✠ There was a churchyard my grandma used to visit where the gravestones were all alike. You could still see the names and the dates on a few of them, though the wind and the rain and the ice had worn most of them down. But the funny thing is *no two of those people were just alike*. They were all different. Some were men and some were women. Some died young and some lived long. And some were tall and some were short. And goodness knows they each had different thoughts, different gifts, different lives and different ways. But there they were in the churchyard, their gravestones all the same.

And I asked her once why they had done that. (I thought, maybe they only knew how to make one kind of marker. But that wasn't it.) "It says something," she said. "The churchyard *says* something about all of these people. It says *they are all God's children*. God formed them *all* in his likeness," she said. "And all of those headstones being the same says *God loves them all just the same*. Doesn't matter who they were, or what they'd done, whether they were rich or poor... Doesn't make any difference what their politics were, they're all the same. God loves all of us, every one of us, just the same... with all of his heart, and with all of his mind, and with all of his strength." ***And that kind of love is stronger than death.***

**See what love the Father has given us that we [even we] should be called the children of God; and so we are. [That is what we are.]**

Let me tell you another story about that this morning. Somewhere far away from here is a little island ten miles long and, at the widest part of it, about six miles wide. And the emperor turned that little island into a place of exile for criminals. And there were some Christians there, too. *Guilty as sin* they were, according to the emperor. Because he thought *he* was God. And he didn't just *think* it, he *said* it. "Forget about this God of yours," he said. "I'm the man! Worship *me!*" (Worst case of the big-head since Nero, this man.) But those pesky Christians and Jews wouldn't do it. They just wouldn't do it. So he banished some of them. Made examples of them and sent them away to this island where he made them work down in the mines and the rock pits....

Now there's an old monastery there on the island. It's been there for about sixteen centuries. It's called the *Monastery of Saint John the Divine*. And it sits right on top of the mountain. And half way up the mountain is a small cave where John, the *beloved disciple*, would pray during his exile from Rome. Tradition has it he was deep in prayer in that little cave on the Isle of Patmos when he was given this strange and incredible vision that we call the *Apocalypse* -- which is a Greek word that doesn't mean what people *think* it means, these days. The word simply means *uncovered* or *revealed*. And in this revelation, in this vision God gave him, John saw a great crowd of people. So many people you couldn't count them, he says. And they were all standing there dressed in white robes, *all just alike*. And they were waving palm branches in the air. All standing in white before the Throne and the Lamb. (Remember the Lamb? Another John, John the Baptist, saw Jesus one day and said, "Look! It's the Lamb -- the Lamb *of God* who takes away the sins of the world.")

So this great crowd was standing before the Throne and the Lamb. And they were singing, "Salvation to our God on his throne! And salvation to the Lamb!" And all the elders and the angels who were standing round the throne fell on their faces and worshiped God!

“And just then,” says John, “One of the elders turned to me and said, ‘Who are these people all dressed in white?’ And John didn’t know. “I thought *you* knew,” he said. And he did. He did. He said, “These are the ones who’ve survived the time of great distress. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” *All of them*. Every one. Their robes are white. All of them the same. And the color white *meant* something back then. It was a *symbol of victory*, a sure sign that they had overcome. And they had. They had. They had overcome the time of great distress. You can almost hear them, can’t you?

***“Who can bring any charge against the people of God? Who can banish them from him? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being slain all the day long; we are looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered.’”***

***“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”***

Oh, they’d gone through so much. But their robes were washed white in the blood of the Lamb. It means they overcame *even death* because Someone loved them, and loved them *so much* he would rather die than be without them. He loved them so much he gave his blood for them. He gave his *life* for them on the cross. And that love is strong, even stronger than death. L

***Oh, see -- see what love the Father has given us that we, even we, should be called the children of God, and so we are.***

Today we remember all the saints -- John the Beloved, Paul the Apostle, Peter and James and Andrew and Stephen the first Christian martyr. We remember the Wesleys (John and Charles and their mother Susanna) and

Martin Luther and Dr. King who was named for him all those years later. And we remember people like Saint Patrick who was kidnapped as a boy and later went back to show his captors God's love. And Saint Francis of Assisi who gave away everything he owned and tried to live as Jesus lived. Oh, and we remember people like Albert Schweitzer and Mother Teresa and E. Stanley Jones. But *most* of all we remember *these* saints and how they touched *our* lives in so many ways through their faith and their hope and their love.

And we give thanks because they now stand before the throne of God. And they worship him night and day in the great congregation. Where they will hunger no more, and thirst no more; where the sun will not strike them (says John) nor any scorching heat. For there the Lamb, *Jesus* the Lamb, is their Shepherd. And he guides them to springs that flow with the water of Life. And there God wipes every tear from their eyes.

There's a beautiful passage from a book that Jesus may have read. It was written a hundred years or so before he was born. And it was read in the synagogues along with the books of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament, we call it). And it says:

***The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God,  
and no torment will ever touch them.***

***In the eyes of the foolish they seem to have died,  
and their departure was thought to be an affliction,  
and their going from us to be their destruction;  
but they are at peace.***

***[For] the righteous live for ever,  
and their reward is with the Lord;***

***The Most high takes care of them.***

***With his hand he will cover them,  
and with his arm he will shelter *them*.***

So they [*our honored saints whom we have named here this day*] are loved with an extraordinary love -- a love stronger even than death. And because of God's love, they are more than conquerors. ✠

Several years ago, a Lutheran Pastor named Richard Wrumbrand was arrested by the Communists in Romania for the same reason John was banished to the Isle of Patmos. In fact, he was on his way to church. And he was arrested because he was a radical, they claimed. A subversive, dangerous sort of criminal, they said. In other words, Richard Wrumbrand was a Christian, a follower of Jesus. And for fourteen years he and others were kept in a small room thirty feet below the ground. And their only light was from one small, dim light bulb. It was, for them, a time of great distress and sorrow and suffering.

But Richard Wrumbrand survived. And when he was finally released he wrote about the horrible things he and the others had endured. The book was called *Tortured for Christ*. And he traveled near and far because so many people wanted to hear Richard's story. But the sad thing is he could barely stand. His feet were so damaged by the torture that whenever he gave a lecture or a sermon he had to sit.

Well, when the wall came down in 1992, Richard was able to go back to Romania. And he was taken to see the very first Christian bookstore in that country. Some people there took him on a tour and showed him the books and all the wonderful things they had there -- bibles, prayer books, pictures and cards. And then the owner of the bookstore said, "Come downstairs ... I want you to see all the wonderful things we have in the stock room."

So Richard and his wife made their way very slowly down the stairs ... step by step. And when they finally reached the bottom and stepped into the room, Richard looked as though he was in shock. He stood there frozen. And then, all of a sudden, this old man with battered feet started dancing across the room. Dancing on wounded feet! And the owner said, "Richard, what are

you doing? What's gotten into you?" And he laughed, and cried. And finally he said, "This is the room they kept me in for fourteen years."

Isn't it amazing, a place of torture had become a place of hope and peace. A room meant for the destruction of the Church became a room filled with items made to strengthen the Church and its witness. God had the last laugh.

And what about the man himself? To see him, they said, and his mangled feet was to look upon sorrow and loss and defeat. But they had it all wrong. For Richard Wrumbrand was more than a conqueror through the One who loved him....

And so are *these* our honored saints. They are conquerors *every one*. And they dance and sing before the throne of God and their Shepherd, the Lamb. For *nothing can separate them from the Love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*. Not even death... They are with God and God is with them. And here and now, in all times and all places, God is with us. And as we gather at the Lord's Table this morning, know they are with us. They are among that great cloud of witnesses cheering us on. And as we lift our hearts to God, they lift theirs as well. And with them we join in the everlasting hymn, "Holy, Holy, Holy ... Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest!

See, oh see what love the father has given us that we, even we, should be called the children of God; and so *you* are. And so you are.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

## Soli Deo Gloria

Benen, ObISB

