There is a rich tradition surrounding the life of St. Lazarus of Bethany. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, tradition states that he fled Judea because of plots against his life (which St. John the Evangelist mentions later in his gospel narrative) and comes to the island of Cyprus. There, he is appointed the bishop of a town called Kirion by St. Paul and St. Barnabas. He lived there for 30 years before being buried for the second and final time.

In Kirion (now called Larnaka), a tomb which was discovered in 890 with the inscription “Lazarus the friend of Christ.” The saint’s remains were transferred to Constantinople by Emperor Leo VI, who built the Church of St. Lazarus over the tomb for the people of Larnaka. There is also a St. Lazarus Chapel in Pskov in Northwestern Russia where a Russian monk returned with relics from the church in Larnaka in the 16th century.

In the Western Church, the tradition holds that Lazarus, along with his sisters, St. Mary and St. Martha, were put in a boat by hostile Judeans with no sails, oars or helm and that, after a miraculous voyage, they landed near Provence in France. Supposedly, the family all went different ways, preaching throughout Gaul. Lazarus went to Marseille, where he became the bishop. During the persecutions under the reign of the emperor Domitian, he was beheaded. His body was laid to rest in Autun, in central France, under the Autun Cathedral, but in Marseille, they still claim possession of his head, which is, of course, venerated.

Normally, when we think of saints, we think of people who are remembered for their great faith, or something miraculous they did, or some act of great kindness or courage they showed. What I find interesting about these stories is that, though many such things have been attributed to St. Lazarus, all those stories are clearly later traditions. The reason St. Lazarus is known—the reason these stories were attributed to him—has very little to do with him at all. The most important thing he ever did himself was die.

It is not miraculous actions or uncommon faith or great piety or even memorable kindness that makes a saint. These are what we tend to think of when we think of saints, but originally, when these sorts of traditions were being developed, people revered saints not because of what those people had done themselves, but because of what they revealed about God. That’s where the stories come from. Stories like these about Lazarus are clearly invented; even if one tradition grew from a kernel of truth, they can’t both be correct because he couldn’t have been in two places at once. The stories grew up to demonstrate what was already true about Lazarus: that through him, we saw the glory of God.

That’s what Jesus says to Martha: “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” And that is what she sees. The story isn’t about her brother walking out of the tomb, but the power of God to give life. It’s about the promise of resurrection. Lazarus wasn’t special; he didn’t do anything out of the ordinary. In the end, he died again, just like all of us do. The special thing in the story is the sneak-peek into the future that God has in store.

On All Saints’ Sunday, as we remember loved ones who have died, we remember this promise and we hope to see them again one day. We read these stories today as visions of God’s promised future where death is swallowed up forever, where mourning and crying and pain are no more, where we and all the people we love walk from the tomb like Lazarus and get to pick up wherever it was that we left off.

That’s a beautiful image, a hopeful image; but I wonder if, in making this day all about that one hope, we are missing something. If all of our hope is in healing what was, in longing for the restoration of what we had that was taken from us, where is the hope for the rest of creation? I look forward to this promise as much as anyone. There are people that I dearly long to see again; but if that’s all resurrection is—seeing people that I lost—I don’t know that that’s enough for me today. I need something more from these stories.

When I read these stories today from Isaiah and John of Patmos and John the Evangelist, I can’t help but notice that they are not visions that look backward toward repairing what once was, but which point us forward to something new that is coming. Isaiah imagines a great feast, where all the peoples of the world celebrate together. John’s vision of the new Jerusalem begins with the observation that “the first things have passed away.” It is this passing away that makes room for the new things to come into their own. Moreover, the passing away is God’s work, too. The voice from the throne proclaims: “See, I am making all things new,” and “I am Alpha *and* Omega, beginning *and* end.”

I feel in myself, at least, a tension coming into this All Saints’ celebration. Maybe you feel it, too. It’s a tension that exists because there are certain “first things” that we are happy to see the ending of: mourning and crying and pain, for example. But these are not all that passes away. Everything—even those things that are comfortable and familiar, including heaven and earth themselves—passes away and is renewed by God. I can’t help but feel like All Saints’, at least the way we tend to observe it, is more about longing for the people that we miss than it is about looking ahead to what God is about to do.

We remember these people today not because they were “saints” in the medieval sense—great heroes of faith whose incredible merit is sufficient to cover our own shortcomings and failures—but because they point us toward the promise of God’s renewal with their entire lives, which includes their deaths. Even death—that “first thing” we most wish to be rid of—helps us to see the glory of God, who is Omega as well as Alpha.

St. Lazarus is case in point: all he did was die. And yet, in his death, Jesus reveals the glory of God. He uses Lazarus’ death as a means to show what God is about to do. And that promised renewal is not just about raising dead people; that’s just the beginning. Everything will be made new: heaven, earth, life, relationship, all of it. We tell Lazarus’ story because he points us to that reality, gives us hope that it is for us, as well.

This is really what makes a saint a saint: that God uses them to testify to God’s new thing. It’s why we can be both sinner and saint at the same time: even our sinfulness testifies to the grace of God in the way God uses flawed people to transmit the promise and hope of God’s new creation. And it is why we remember the people we do today.

Those who have died did so in the hope of resurrection, and even in death, they testify to that hope. But we also remember people who have just joined this life, people like Weslie and Henry and Eleanor. They also testify to this hope, not with words, but with their very lives. Their existence is a sign of the renewal that God is already bringing about in this world. As some die, others are born: a cycle that prefigures the death and rebirth of everything that is. Even as we mourn the passing of dear friends and family, we continue to pass along their stories and the stories of others long gone to those who come after us, in hopes that those stories will point them to the promise, as well.

How does that promise change us? How can it breathe new life into us as people, and as a community? I have observed before that the moment in which we live—this pandemic moment, this moment of social and racial reckoning—is a moment in which we are called to move forward, not backward. It is especially clear now that there is nothing for us to return to: the old order, the old normal, the old status quo, is gone. The first things have passed away. Behold, God is making all things new! So what does that mean for us right now? How do we navigate this moment?

I don’t have the answer to that question; but I do think that the lives of the saints—past, present and future—can help us as we wrestle with it. Even as old beloved things pass away—things like institutions and traditions and practices, and even beloved people—new things and new people are coming into being. We haven’t gotten to where we are by fighting to go backward, but by boldly following the example of those who came before us by looking ahead to what God is about to do and living in the reality of the new things, the new creation.

St. Lazarus walked out of the tomb in St. John’s story, but he later died. He was buried for a second and final time. I wonder if his second death can be as much an experience of God’s glory as his first. I wonder if our hope lies not in cheating or escaping death, but in welcoming it in its turn, embracing it knowing that it, too, will pass away when its own time comes. What first things are we holding onto that need to pass away now? What ecstatic visions of new things is God giving to us in this moment? If we can hope for a day when the dead walk out of their tombs, can we not also hope for new ways of thinking and being here and now? Or are we too bound and tangled in the graveclothes in which we’ve chosen to wrap ourselves?

If that is true, then perhaps Jesus’ final words in this story can give us encouragement and direction. As Lazarus stumbles from the tomb, he calls to those gathered to “Unbind him, and let him go.” Perhaps this is a call and an invitation to us, as well, that we might unbind one another. Maybe this is even work that the saints departed are engaged in, as with their stories they testify to what is coming next. Perhaps they, even in death, are working now to unbind us, and let us go, that we may stand tall and look upon the new heaven and the new earth that God is bringing into being.