

WHO'S BURIED IN GRANT'S TOMB?

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And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes." (Revelation 21:3)

Last year, in the run up to Christmas, I happened to read a review of a new book by the author Ron Chernow. It was a biography of the Civil War general and 18th President of the United States, Ulysses S. Grant. I thought to myself that if I dropped a few hints around the family, I might find it under the tree on Christmas morning. Sure enough, there it was. What I had not counted on was that the book is 959 pages long and weighs as much as a brick. When would I ever read it? Well, I'm pleased say that even though it took me all summer, I found the time. I confess that I had never fully appreciated the magisterial figure of Grant: his brilliance as a general, his achievements as President, and his lifelong devotion to his wife and children. A common thread through all the parts of his life was a commitment to equal rights for all races. So Grant battled the external demons of slavery that scarred the nation, as well as scandals that plagued his administration. He also battled and overcame his own internal demon of alcoholism. When he died in 1885, a million grateful citizens lined the streets of New York City to see the funeral procession of a man they credited with saving the nation twice.

Late last summer, having finished the book, I decided to make a trek uptown to see Grant's tomb, something I had never before done. Thus, on a sweltering hot day in August, my son Luke and I arrived at the enormous mausoleum in Riverside Park. What you do is go first to the visitor center across the street to watch a short film about Grant. This we did with about three or four others, and when it was done a park ranger came to escort us back across the street and inside the mausoleum. But first he quizzed us with the old joke: "Who's buried in Grant's tomb?" Not to be fooled, I said "Grant." Someone else said, "Grant and his wife." The park ranger rather triumphantly declared both of us wrong. Actually, he explained, the mortal remains of Grant and his wife rest side-by-side in above-ground sarcophagi, so technically, no one is buried in Grant's tomb. No one was really in the mood for jokes, either. But score one for the park ranger!

Inside the mausoleum, I must admit that I was strangely moved in a way I hadn't expected. I looked down and there indeed were the sarcophagi. I looked up and saw colorful mosaics depicting scenes from Grant's life, most especially, Grant and Lee at Appomattox Court House, where Grant was able to draft terms of surrender that ended the Civil War. I am not a mystic, but for a moment it was as if the fabric of time had a tear in it, and these events and lives of long ago briefly became present realities. It was a fleeting experience that is difficult to describe. Words fail me. It was nothing I could capture on camera or audio. Needless to say, Grant's tomb is a special place, a mystical place, even what the Celtic Christians might call a thin place in the veil between heaven and earth.

Certain places seem to occupy a point in space and time where the barriers between yesterday, today, and tomorrow appear to collapse. Some historic event, some great life lived, or perhaps centuries of prayer endow an otherwise ordinary site with the numinous. For me, certain days of the church year also represent a thin place between heaven and earth, and the Feast of All Saints is one of them. Today we celebrate the wonderful and sacred mystery known as the Communion of Saints. What we proclaim is that those who belong to Jesus – past, present, and future – are one family of the living God who is eternally now. Appropriately, we've heard today

a reading from the Book of Revelation in which St. John writes of his experience in a thin place. Words don't fail him. He looked and *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.* And he *saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.* John saw the future day when heaven and earth would be one, when God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven.

John not only saw through the veil, he also heard a loud voice – the voice of Jesus – announce the promises of God. *“See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 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.”* We might wonder: why do they have tears in their eyes? Obviously, they are not tears of joy, because God promises to wipe them away. They are tears of memory: tears of remembering life's losses and wrongs and sufferings. The tears imply that the inhabitants of heaven arrive with their memories and histories. They arrive with their selves and souls intact. Thus, those we have loved and lost are there as themselves, yet healed, renewed. *“See, I am making all things new,”* declares Jesus. And then, *“It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.”* That which is still to come is already done, and our destiny is secured. *“Write this,”* said Jesus. *“These words are trustworthy and true.”*

Trustworthy and true? Really? It's one thing to talk about visions of heaven and earth being one, it's another thing to see any signs of such thing coming to pass. Meanwhile, the powers of death keep on doing their worst. Death always has the last laugh. Recently I read an article about the television personality Dick Cavett, and what he counted as the most memorable moments in his long running talk show. Cavett recalls a guest in 1971 by the name of Jerome Rodale. At the time Rodale was 72-years old, and known as “Mr. Organic” for his commitment to organic foods and healthy living. During his interview segment Rodale declared that with his wholesome diet he planned on living to be 100. When the next guest came on, Rodale moved over one seat and remained on the set, as was the custom on talk shows in those days. As he sat there, with the cameras rolling, the man who moments before claimed he would live to be 100 leaned back and died of a heart attack in front of the studio audience. The powers of death had no respect for the hubris of a health guru, and they did their worst.

The powers of death have been on full display over the past few weeks. Hate crimes and mass murders are frequent occurrences, and some say that as a nation we are as divided as we were prior to the Civil War. Given our current state of affairs, St. John's vision of heaven and earth being one strikes us as rather unbelievable, doesn't it? It's a fantasy. If I seemed to have a mystical experience at Grant's tomb last August, it's because my mind was open to suggestion, having read the 959-page book. Or it was because the temperature outside was nearly 100-degrees, and I'd had too much sun. If our celebration of All Saints' today feels like a wrinkle in time, it's because we all set our clocks back an hour last night, and we are enjoying the euphoria of extra sleep. You see, every curious phenomena ultimately has a natural, rational explanation to it. We need not resort to the supernatural. But then you'll stumble into a moment that leaves you weeping, or an experience will overtake you that you can't explain. Almost like the Mandarin duck that has taken up residence in a Central Park pond, some vision of striking beauty in the midst of the ordinary will inspire awe and joy and thanks. Someone like Grant will come along in history to heal the divisions and bind up the wounds. A saint will walk the earth.

I believe today's reading from the Gospel of John (11:32-34) speaks of all these things: thin places in the veil between heaven and earth, and the need for saints to walk among us in the time of this mortal life. You heard about Lazarus of Bethany, the brother of Mary and Martha, all of them friends of Jesus. Lazarus had grown seriously ill. Mary and Martha called for Jesus, but he was delayed. Lazarus died and was placed in a tomb. Four days later Jesus finally arrived in

Bethany and asked to see the tomb. It strikes me that no one was in the mood for jokes, but if you were to ask who was buried in Lazarus' tomb, the technical answer would have been no one. According to first-century Jewish burial custom, Lazarus' body would have been wrapped in linens and laid out with spices on a shelf in an above-ground cave. The cave would have been a small chamber, dug into a hillside, and capable of containing numerous bodies. The entrance would have been covered by a large stone, shaped like a disk so it could be rolled back and forth to gain access. You see, burial was a two-stage process. After about a year, the body would decompose and only the bones would remain. The family would return, collect the bones into a bone box, and place the box permanently either deeper in the chamber or someplace else. If the business of death in those days sounds unpleasant, I'm sure it was. When Jesus commanded that the stone be removed, Martha protested for fear of the smell.

So the tomb of Lazarus would have been no glorious mausoleum, but a roughly cut, grisly place, reeking of death. Nevertheless, it would turn out to be one of those locations where heaven and earth intermingle and overlap, where the veil between here and eternity is thin. Even Jesus was overcome with emotion. Jesus wept. John 11:35 is the shortest, and some say the most powerful verse in the Bible. Words initially failed Jesus, but then, with the same loud voice calling forth life that St. John heard in heaven, he cried, "Lazarus, come out." Lazarus came out, still wrapped in his grave clothes. "Unbind him and let him go," instructed Jesus.

Though the raising of Lazarus has been called the greatest of Jesus' miracles, it also arouses the most questions. Whatever became of Lazarus? We don't know, but it's hard to imagine that the rest of his life wasn't completely and profoundly changed. Surely this man, having been through such a baptism of dying and rising walked the earth as a blessing to others, knowing that his life derived from Jesus. But if Jesus could raise the dead, why did he need people to move the stone and unwrap Lazarus? Perhaps to show that you and I really do have meaningful work to do in the church's mission. Jesus invites us to join with him in making all things new. Until we do, Lazarus is just a guy hopping around in a mummy costume. "Unbind him, and let him go," said Jesus. We have work to do in the world. We play a role in the sending forth of saints.

So today we baptize eleven people in hopes that some of them, if not all of them, will be saints on earth. Today we light candles not only to celebrate the saints of our lives who have died, but to remember that we are the light of the world. We are a city set on a hill that cannot and should not be hid. Today, by the power of the Spirit, we receive the body and blood of Jesus to strengthen us to do the work he has given us to do.

Today, I'm told you can go to Bethany in the Holy Land and visit the site traditionally designated as the tomb of Lazarus. It is humble and unadorned. No one is buried in Lazarus' tomb – at least not that one. But Lazarus eventually would rest in another tomb. Lazarus, after living out the remainder of his natural life, would die again and be buried in a place that is long forgotten. The raising of Lazarus was a miracle of the first order, but it is neither our hope nor our expectation. All technicalities aside, the mortal remains of Ulysses S. Grant and his wife are in fact buried in Grant's tomb. Our destiny is not to be pulled back out of death for more of this life. Rather, it is to go through death with Jesus, and out the other side, to join that great multitude which no one can number, who with angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven rejoice with us even today. Then shall the words of our Lord finally be fulfilled:

"See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 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. It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end ... Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true."