

SOME ARE COMING ALIVE

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Grace Church in New York
All Saints' Sunday
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After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count. Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these robed in white?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one who knows." (from Revelation 7)

If you walk the corridors of Grace Church School you will often see great works of student art adorning the walls. Until recently a large mural depicting a great multitude of figures hung near the main lobby. It was the handiwork of the 4th graders, and when I looked I wondered, "Who are these, etched on paper?" Quick as a flash I realized that I knew. They were the Chinese Terracotta Army, one of the archeological wonders of the world. The Terracotta Army is actually part of an ancient tomb. Qin Shi Huang was the First Emperor of China, who united the warring tribes of the region into the single nation we know today. He also began construction of the Great Wall.

Qin Shi Huang suffered no lack of self-esteem. In fact, he devised elaborate plans for what would one day be his burial site. It covers 38 square miles, and thousands of workers labored for decades to complete it. When the Emperor died in 210 BC he was indeed buried there, surrounded by jewels, rivers of mercury, and, most remarkably, an army of life-sized terracotta – or baked clay – statues. In the ensuing centuries the monument was largely lost in the sands of time. It was only in 1974 when some farmers digging a well uncovered the first soldier. Now after forty-five years of carefully removing the earth, archaeologists have revealed a great multitude of statues surrounding the Emperor's resting place. Each one of the 8,000 statues is unique, with distinct facial features and expressions. Some wear full military garb, while others stand with horses beside battle chariots. Most all of them carry weapons.

No one really knows the purpose of the terracotta army. Many think they were to frighten away grave robbers. But others believe that they were to escort the Emperor on his last, great journey. They were to be his advance guard into the unknown country, protect him from whatever foes might await him, and even secure his place in the life after death.

Today is All Saints' Sunday. Today we proclaim that we are surrounded by a great multitude, a great army who toiled, and fought, and lived, and died for the Lord they loved and knew. Today we celebrate the sacred mystery known as the Communion of Saints. Whenever we speak of saints, various otherworldly and pious people usually come to mind. But the New Testament uses the word "saint" to refer to any Christian. So the saints of God don't necessarily have halos around their heads. They can be folks just like us. They can be folks we have known and loved, and lost because death has taken them out of our sight. Today we print their names and light candles to declare that they are not extinguished.

Some would call the list of names in your bulletins today necrology: a list of the dead. But we do not call it necrology. For us it is a list of the resurrected. It is a list of the living. The Communion of Saints is hardly an army of lifeless, baked-clay statues. Instead, it is a living, active, vital multitude. It is a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us and the throne of God. St. John the Divine, in the Book of Revelation, writes *I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count. They worshipped God, singing, Amen.* But who are they, was the question put to John? Cyprian of Carthage, a 3rd century bishop, seemed to be one who knew. He wrote:

We reckon paradise to be our home. A great throng awaits us there of those dear to us, parents, brothers, sons. A packed and numerous throng longs for us, of those already free from anxiety for their own salvation, who are still concerned for our salvation. What joy they share with us when we come into their sight and embrace them! What pleasure there is in the heavenly kingdom, with no fear of death, and what supreme happiness with the enjoyment of eternal life.¹

The images are compelling, whether imparted by John the Divine or a Cyprian of Carthage. If being a saint is what it takes to participate in the joy of the multitude, then “I mean to be one too,” as the beloved old hymn puts it. I want to be in that number! Today we have added six new saints to that number. Today six newly baptized Christians enter the household of God, which is a family and fellowship that death cannot divide. “Ah,” say the cynics of the world, “you’re kidding yourselves.” The skeptics would say that baptism is an empty ritual, that lighting candles for the dead is an exercise in sentimentality, that dredging up the words of an Early Church bishop is akin to an archeological dig. We are all just terracotta statues. We are all mortal through and through, formed of the earth from head to toe, and to the earth we return. Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. True it is. “All we go down to the dust,” as the Burial Office in the Prayer Book starkly states it. All of us who have yearned for eternal life go down to the dust from which we were formed. All of us will be lost in the sands of time. But here is the next line in the Burial Office: “Yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia.”

How can it be? How can it be that we should sing God’s praises even at the grave? C.S. Lewis wrote that Christianity is precisely about statues coming alive. That’s right: statues coming to life. “*The world is a great sculptor’s shop,*” he wrote. “*We are the statues and there is a rumor going round the shop that some of us are someday going to come to life.*”² Years ago an amusing incident occurred at the museum that is now atop the archeological dig at Qin Shi Huang’s tomb. A young German art student who had always been fascinated by the terracotta army fashioned a costume that made him look eerily like one of the statues. He packed his gear into a suitcase that he carried into the museum. When no one was looking he put on his disguise, leaped into the pit where the soldiers stood, and took his place in a row of statues. Someone either saw him jump down, or – more shocking still – saw one of the statues move. Soon a rumor was afoot that one of the terracotta figures was alive. Security guards began searching, walking up and down the rows, scanning the thousands of clay faces for signs of life. They had no easy time of it, but they finally found the one who lived and pulled him up out of the pit.

So I ask again: how can it be that we should sing God’s praises even at the grave? What we say to a cynical world is this: A rumor is afoot that some of us terracotta statues are someday going to come to life. One already has – Christ, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep, as St. Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians (ch. 15). He goes on: “*As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ, the first fruits, then those who belong to Christ.*” You see, Christ, the One who took on flesh and descended into our mortal state, the One who leaped into our pit and took his place amongst the rows of humanity, also wants to raise us up to a new and larger life, more abundant than anything we can ask for or imagine. He wants to breathe his Spirit into us, as he breathed the breath of life into Adam, and made him a living being. So goes the story in Genesis. Adam, the representative human, a creation of clay, received the breath of the Spirit and came to life.

So a rumor is afoot that some of us are coming to life. Like the guards at the tomb of Qin Shi Huang, you can walk the rows of people you meet in school or at work or in shops or at tea. Some are coming to life. Some aren’t. Some are becoming saints. Some aren’t. But how can you tell who’s coming to life and who isn’t? How can you tell if you or someone you know is coming alive in Christ? Here I believe Matthew’s Gospel comes to our aid. This morning we’ve heard

the well-known Beatitudes, in which Jesus points to those statues who are coming to life. Are you becoming a saint? Do you mean to be one too? It's quiz time; test yourself:

- You are blessed, you are coming to life, you are becoming a saint he says, when you are poor in spirit. Why? Because when you aren't full of yourself you can be filled with Christ.
- You are coming to life when you mourn, because you are never more alive than when you grieve. Every feeling and emotion is magnified exponentially. God awards no gold stars for stiff upper lips and bottled-up emotions.
- You are coming to life when you are meek, because humility and patience are the virtues that prepare us to meet the Lord.
- You are coming to life when you hunger and thirst for righteousness, because it means you yearn to be the person God intends you to be.
- You are coming to life when you are merciful, because it means you work on forgiving those who fail to be the people God intends them to be.
- You are coming to life when you are pure in heart, because it means your motives are to build people up, not tear them down.
- You are coming to life when you practice peacemaking, because in Christ's kingdom no one carries a weapon.
- You are coming to life when you are persecuted for the sake of Christ and his kingdom, because darkness will always try to overcome light. But if the light of Christ shines in you, the darkness shall not overcome it.

Are you coming to life? Can a statue come to life, even awaken to the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us? I remember the coming to life of my maternal grandmother many years ago. She was 88 at the time, living independently, and sharp as a tack. Then one summer she suffered a series of small strokes that required a move to a nursing home. The move confused her and accelerated a downward spiral. At one point in her mental digression she lamented that when she tried to concentrate, all she saw was "a big black hole." By October a larger stroke rendered her essentially comatose, and she languished in the hospital bed of a stroke unit for weeks on end. It was awful. It dragged on and on, day after day, night after night. My mother kept vigil, and was there one night in late November when it seemed like the end was nearing. She remembers that my grandmother's eyes were open, and the two were looking at each other. Then my grandmother's gaze seemed to focus beyond my mother. She raised her head – something she hadn't done for over a month – and her face suddenly lit up with a smile. It was unmistakably a smile. It was as if a statue had come to life. The moment was brief. She eased her head back to the pillow breathed her last.

All of us have long wondered: what caused her to smile? What did she see? Or, more accurately, whom did she see? Who were they like stars appearing at her last awakening? Were they parents, brothers, sisters? Were they those concerned for her salvation? Was it a great multitude to guide her to the other shore?

Whoever they were, when she looked, she knew. What joy she expressed when they came into her sight! What pleasure they must know in the Communion of Saints, with no fear of death, with angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven. Where God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes.

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¹ From the Fathers to the Churches, Edited by Brother Kenneth CGA, Collins, 1985, p. 367.

² Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis. Book IV, Chapter 1.