

All Saints Day
The Reverend John H. Brock

Sunday, November 1, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 24; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen

There are a couple of cemeteries that have been influential in my life. The first one I want to talk about is Farmington Community Cemetery, which is kitty-corner from the United Methodist Church in Farmington, North Carolina. There are several generations of Brocks buried there. It's a nice place. You can't see it if you are on Highway 801 North because the Christian Education Building blocks the view. It is, as well, as my cousins would say, "down in a hollar." As you enter Farmington Community Cemetery, you take the first right, follow the road around to the first left, go about halfway down, and park on the grass (in case someone else comes along and needs to get by).

If you walk up the hill on your left, there's the big tree at the top (I think it is a oak, but I don't remember). If you go to the tree you'll see there, marked in an area roughly the size this stage, a very low concrete wall. You'll notice that the name Brock is very prominent. Not only in that little section, but throughout Farmington Community Cemetery. Davie County is rather thick with Brocks, or as my spouse would say, "Brocks are dense in Davie County." Brocks have been in North Carolina since it was part of the colonies. One of my ancestors even fought in the war for independence.

Farmington Community Cemetery is where Hugh and Nancy Sue Brock, my grandparents, are buried. They're probably the most recent adult addition to that small little plot. Hugh's parents are there, as well as one of his brothers. If you go over to the very side of that plot, you will see a few smaller stones. One for my son Noah, and one for his cousin Lisa, who didn't spend much more time in this life than Noah did. Just on the other side of the tree, you'll see a big stone marked Allen. That is where Uncle Irvine is buried. Irvine married my Aunt Emmy Sue while she was still in high school. He went off to the Korean Conflict, came home, sired three boys, but was killed in a robbery by a drunken thief. Since my parents moved to Florida several years ago, I haven't been back to Farmington, at least not physically.

The other cemetery that has influenced me is Mount Carmel Cemetery in Hillside, Illinois. I saw Mount Carmel Cemetery every day when I went to elementary and high school, because Mount Carmel sits directly to the south of Hillside Elementary School and directly west of Proviso West High School. Mount Carmel Cemetery also happens to be the final resting place for all of the Cardinals of the Chicago Roman Catholic Diocese, which I never really understood, because Mount Carmel Cemetery is at the far western edge of Cook County, a good 17 miles from downtown Chicago. But, they're Catholics - how can a Lutheran understand? It is also the final resting place for the Capone' family, and their most notorious son, Alphonse. We learned that if you every saw a black limo parked in front of that one, you went the other way.

Mount Carmel is much larger than Farmington Community, probably at least four times the size. In Junior High, I enjoyed riding my bicycle all around Mount Carmel. I'd zoon around,

pretending I was on some secret mission for the Allies during the Second World War, or that I was busy fighting vampires or other monster from the latest science fiction book I'd read. But mainly, I'd go there to visit Dominco and Gelsomina, another set of great-grandparents. I would sit, with my back against their stone, looking across the road at Proviso West High School. Or, I would sit there reading a book, wondering about life, the universe - anything. I felt comfortable there; relaxed and unconcerned.

Now my great-grandparents stone, there at Mount Carmel, was different from many of the sites around them. Mount Carmel is known, at least in Cook County, Illinois, for its mausoleums. Many of them, I think, are amazing building, especially the mausoleums for the Roman Catholic Cardinals: metal doors with intricate glass work, and many of them have a stained glass window at the far end of them. And, they are locked. They are *always* locked. I wonder if that was to keep kids like me out, or to keep the residents in. I never figured that one out.

A mausoleum is really sort of what Lazarus was put in. In the Middle East during the 1st Century (actually for many centuries before and after the 1st as well) when someone died, they got entombed. It was really more like a cave, or a very short tunnel dug into a hillside. It's not really a grave, in the manner that we Americans think of a grave. The bodies were wrapped in cloth, and they were doused in perfume to help mask the stink of decomposition. They were then placed in this tomb and something was put over the door that would keep out the critters that would smell the decomposing flesh and think "Lunchtime!" Normally folks would go back in about a year, and gather up bones, because at that time all of the flesh would be gone. That's when, and what, would be buried in the manner in which we are accustomed.

We don't know a whole lot about this guy Lazarus. We don't know why he was so important to Jesus. There is no mention of a Lazarus in Matthew or Mark. In Luke, the only mention of a guy named Lazarus is in that parable of the beggar sitting outside of the rich guy's house, who is covered in sores and who eventually succumbs to his situation. It's only in John's gospel that we get this apparently strong, but unmentioned, friendship, between Lazarus and Jesus.

In all of the gospels this is the only recorded incident where Jesus weeps for anyone. He is so moved by Lazarus' death that he wants the stone to the tomb moved in order to — we don't really know what for. We don't know why he asked for the stone to be moved, but we do know though what the results of moving the stone, and hearing Jesus' voice brought about.

A couple of weeks ago at Saturday Night Worship (every Saturday, 5:30, right here in Fellowship Hall), I played a song as recorded by a guy named Peder Eide, a good Lutheran boy from Minnesota. It's called "Roll the Stone Away," and I'll spare you my singing voice, but let me quote the chorus:

Roll the stone away, what I say is true.
Roll the stone away, see the wonder God can do.
Roll the stone away, you got no other choice.
If he's gonna rise, gotta hear my voice.
Roll, roll, roll the stone away.

Each of us, in our lives, have stones. We have tombs that part of us lives in. In a few minutes, I am going to be reading a list of names – forty-one names, to be exact. And each and every one of those names has some connection, or some kind of relationship, with Trinity. Either they were members, or they were family to members, or, they were members of our greater community. All of those funerals were presided over by one of our pastors: either Pastor Hardy, Bishop Edmiston, Pastor Easton, or myself.

We each have tombs in our lives, and God calls to each and every one of us to roll away the stone that covers our own tomb. It might be a tomb of grief; a tomb filled with anger, or sorrow or heartache. God calls to us to roll away the stone that covers up our tomb of selfishness, or pride, or lust.

Today, this All Saints Day, we are reminded that we are not alone. Not in this life, nor in the life to come. Today, this All Saints Day, we are reminded that just because our loved one's hearts might have stopped beating, or their lungs have stopped breathing, that does not mean that their love for us has stopped. Nor does it mean that our love for them has stopped.

Today, this All Saints Day, we are reminded of the promises that are made to us in our baptism. Those promises that we will be gathered together again, in the last. Now, today, Christ calls to us, God says to us, 'roll your stone away.' Open the doors to your own mausoleum. Go and stand by that oak tree in that little country cemetery. Don't allow yourself to be held back. Don't keep yourself in your darkness.

This All Saints Day, roll the stone away, open the door, stand by the tree and look up to the sky. Let the light of Christ shine in, and let the voice of Christ fill your ears. Walk out of the tomb and into a brand new day, just like Lazarus.

Amen.