“Unbind him and let him go.”

This morning, I want to tell you about a time when I needed unbinding, a time when I was having a hard time letting go.

I’ve never shared this in the pulpit. Today – All Saints Sunday – feels like a good day to share this.

Many years ago – twenty years ago to be exact – I was a working journalist – a beat reporter at The Sacramento Bee, and if I do say so, I was good at it. I had covered two presidential campaigns, the California Legislature, and the Olympic Games.

But I had long felt the pull to be a priest, and as the decades wore on, that pull only got stronger.

I ran out of ways to say “no,” and so at the top my journalism career with The Sacramento Bee, I quit.

Flat out, cold turkey quit.

I collected my vacation pay, and took a month-long break before entering the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, our Episcopal seminary in Berkeley.

Maybe that month was too long.

I began to have second thoughts. What had I done? I was in my mid-40s. Going back to school, taking tests and writing term papers seemed, well, ridiculous. I began to devise Plan B for how to beg for my job back.

Perhaps sensing this, my father handed me a large, slightly tattered black book, held together with masking tape, and suggested I might want to read it.

I vaguely knew of this book – it had sat on my father’s bookshelf for decades – but I knew nothing of what it contained.

As the summer wore on, the book sat unopened. I was busy with this and that. But the weekend before I was to depart for seminary, I was filled with dread. So, finally, I picked up the old tattered black book.

I spent the weekend reading it.

The book had been given to my father by his father, and the book contained the life story of one my ancestors George Richardson, born in 1824. He was my great-great grandfather and a Methodist pastor.

The book, written in his own hand in neat cursive writing, told an amazing story.

He had been a traveling Methodist minister in the years before the Civil War. George and his wife, Caroline, had used their house in Galena, Illinois, as a stop on the Underground Railroad, spiriting escaped slaves to freedom.
In the Civil War, he volunteered to be the white chaplain to an African American Union regiment posted in Memphis, and he saw battles in Tennessee and Mississippi.

After the Civil War, George and Caroline founded a school for freed slaves in Dallas. It was burned down by the Ku Klux Klan they rebuilt it. The city of Dallas chased it out and they rebuilt it in Austin, Texas, and that school stands today as Huston-Tillotson University, one of the historically African American colleges in the United States.

If there are any saints in my family, they would be George and Caroline Richardson.

After reading the book, I headed off to seminary. It didn’t take long – like the first day of classes – before my dread of going back to school turned to panic.

And that is when I had an overwhelming sense of the presence of my ancestors telling me to buck up and get on with it. I can only describe this as a holy experience.

I have felt their presence ever since, nudging me along.

I am here to tell you today that the Resurrection is real, we are all a part of it, and we can touch it.

The Resurrection is real. The Resurrection is about us and about everyone we know, everyone we love, everyone who has come before us and everyone who has come after.

And they surround us today, telling us to buck up, get on with it, and nudging us forward.

Where we see only borders and fences, Jesus sees only horizons and opportunities.

Where we see only endings and finality, Jesus sees only new beginnings and new life.

Today in John’s gospel we get big reminder about this reality in this astonishing story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

As the gospel story unfolds, Jesus learns that his friend, Lazarus, is dead. He sees Lazarus’s sister, Mary, weeping, and everyone around her is in terrible pain.

Jesus, “disturbed in spirit,” begins to weep, and he decides to do the unimaginable: Bring Lazarus back from the dead.

Jesus walks to the Lazarus’s tomb and orders, “Take away the stone.” When the tomb is open, the stench is overpowering.

And then everything wells up in Jesus, and he shouts “Come out! Unbind him and let him go!”

Unbind him and let him go.

What is it that binds us? What needs to be unbound so that we might see and touch the Resurrection that is ours before we ask?
There truly is more to life than what we see now. This is why we celebrate All Saints Sunday.

But we don’t always see it. We don’t always experience it.

What is it that binds us from seeing and experiencing the holy surrounding us? How do we turn away from the holy, which is the most elemental definition of that loaded word: Sin.

I cannot let the day pass without a few words about the original sin of Christianity: anti-Semitism – the persecution of the Jewish people.

Jesus was a Jew, and everything he said and did was immersed in his Judaism.

In the Lazarus story, Jesus sees the tears and feels the pain of his fellow Jews. Their pain is his pain.

Yet as the years past, and this new religion spread, Jews became the scapegoats, the aliens, and were persecuted and murdered in the name of Christ.

Last week, we got a jarring reminder that this sin of anti-Semitism still lives and has taken on new life here in our beloved country.

In faraway Pittsburgh, a lone gunman, spewing hateful anti-Jewish slurs, walked into a synagogue and murdered 11 people because they were Jewish as they gathered for Saturday prayers.

In the days that have followed, we’ve seen more acts of hatred, vandalism and hate speech.

But that is not the end of the story. The murderer does not get the last word.

Two days later, here in Sacramento, many of us joined more than a thousand faithful people – Jews, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and others – at Congregation B’nai Israel to pray and pledge to stand together against hate in all its evil forms.

We gathered in a synagogue that 20 years ago was fire bombed by white supremacists – one of three Sacramento synagogues that were firebombed on that horrific night.

I felt the same hollowness last Monday that I had felt then.

But I also felt more than ever the importance of our baptismal pledge to love our neighbors as ourselves, to strive for justice and peace, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

Today we are baptizing, and we will hold these pledges for this child until she is old enough to hold these pledges for herself.

And this brings me back to the Lazarus story with Jesus standing at the tomb. The story of Lazarus, and his sisters, and their friends, is about us – all of us.

What seems so impossible to us, is possible for God. It is we who bind ourselves within the limits of our mortal vision. But for God, no one is beyond redemption, not even those who are consumed by their hatred.
Everyone we love and see no longer is just over the horizon from where we cannot now see. All that has wounded them, or wounded us, all that they did to harm others or to harm themselves, all that is gone, wiped away, healed.

The best of them, and the best of ourselves, lives into eternity

Please let me close with a few words from one of the most eloquent and spiritual people I have ever met, Stephen Charleston, who is the retired Episcopal bishop of Alaska. Here is what he writes:

“You are being blessed by those who loved you most. You are safe in their care. The air around you is filled with a ceaseless benediction, your life held secure in hearts as pure as holy.”

AMEN