The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber
The Feast of All Souls
11.1.26

When I was six years old, my mom's brother, Uncle Greg, died.

I remember being summoned downstairs early that morning. I remember sitting on the flower-patterned couch next to my younger sisters Anne and Julie. I remember Dad talking to us about how Grandma had found Uncle Greg that morning.

I remember Mom weeping the whole time.

The next days were full of activity. Driving to Detroit. Lots of extended family and lots of food. We children were kept back with a babysitter. We were not present for the funeral.

Uncle Greg and I had a close bond, a deep love. He played with my clippy clowns with me. He sent me cards with packets of bubble bath for my birthdays. He took me to the movies. He pushed me around in his wheelchair, and let me push him. I got my love of musical theater from him. He made me feel special whenever we were together.

Greg was 31 when he died. He had cerebral palsy, and in my child's mind I assumed that his disability must have made him die young. I would find out as a young adult, that he had died by suicide.

What I don't remember, from that time immediately after Uncle Greg's death, or in the years after, was ever grieving for him. My Mom grieved openly and deeply. For a long time, years, she would burst into tears whenever someone mentioned his name.

For me, Uncle Greg was just not there anymore. I was given his cassette tapes, including many musicals, and I played them endlesslessly. But as the years went by, I wondered, did we really love each other that much? Did I remember correctly? After all, I was so young.

This evening, we celebrate All Souls' Day, the Feast of All the Faithful Departed. We remember the people in our community who have died in the past year. We spend time with our loved ones buried in the columbarium. We think of all those we have loved but see no longer. We celebrate even those departed who we never knew.

Every year on this feast day, we hear the mysterious words of Jesus. Truly I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.

This is not some end-times statement by Jesus. He is talking about now. And Jesus does not say this just before he is condemned and killed. No, this is something Jesus says in chapter 5 of John's 21 chapter Gospel, and he says it right in the middle of healing and preaching and feeding thousands with a few loaves and fishes.

The hour is coming, Jesus says. The hour is now here. The dead will live.

What can he possibly mean?

Today we remember the people we love who have died. We remember who they were, and who they were for us. We may have all kinds of feelings as we remember. Sadness. Anger. Regret. Gratitude. A warm heart. An emptiness.

Through these feelings, we speak with the dead. Through these feelings, these yearnings, these silent communications, we bring them back.

Truly I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.

Somewhere around 12 years ago, something inside me woke up. It was one of the beginnings of my spiritual awakening, one of the beginnings of my call to the priesthood. And as part of that waking up, I began to suddenly and unexpectedly grieve hard for my Uncle Greg.

For no clear reason, no special anniversary or trigger, I went through several weeks of a dull pain in my chest, a heaviness, and strange and sudden crying in my car on the way to and from work. I all of a sudden understood what a friend at work had called "feeling griefish" when her husband had died a few years before.

I talked to others about it. I prayed. And I talked to Greg himself. I questioned, I remembered, I moved through all the strange and sad feelings. And gradually the heaviness lifted. I would still feel that sense of loss at different times, and I can feel it today. But something changed. I no longer felt

that Uncle Greg was just not there. He was dead, and that felt painful, but I also felt I had gotten him back. I could share things with him again. I could sense him with me. Our love had been real, I was certain of that. He was a living presence for me again.

Truly I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.

When we remember the loved ones we have lost, when we celebrate on evenings like this one, we are doing practices that bring the dead back to life. When we say to them, I'm sorry I never told you this, or, You would have loved to see that, we are making them present once again, right here and now.

When we let our love for them rise inside us, when we do not ignore or deny it or say, it was so long ago, when we allow our feelings to just be, we are participating in an act of resurrection, for our loved ones, and for ourselves.

We are saying, They are a part of us now. We are saying, Our love for them is real. We are witnessing to the truth that love can never die.

So let us remember together, be thankful together, weep together, this evening. Let us feel the presence of those we have lost, here with us. Let us be witnesses to their resurrection. Let us bring that resurrection with us when we leave this place. Amen.