

40,000 skulls

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40,000 human skulls. They haunt me.

Several weeks ago, I was in Europe, celebrating 25 years of marriage and visiting the towns along the Danube River. It was a wonderful trip—yet what I can't get out of my mind is the sight of 40,000 neatly stacked human skulls, in the Sedlac Ossuary in Kutna Hora, a small town in the Czech Republic.

The image sometimes comes back to me several times a day. It's not warm and fuzzy; definitely not Christmas-carol stuff. And it's not that oh-so-mild Advent waiting that everyone talks about, the kind where you listen and light candles and feel smug because the rest of the world is shopping and you are praying.

Probably why the skulls keep reappearing in my mind is this: aside from skin and breath and a few hundred years, they're not that different from us. These *people* enjoyed their favorite meals and sang their favorite songs and went to church. They played and made love and flirted and cooked and raised their children. They felt and thought and dreamed. Then they—too quickly—died, victims of the bubonic plague in the 14th century and the Hussite wars in the 15th century. And now their remains are stacked in a church basement.

Legend has it that a half-blind monk arranged the remains. He did a pretty good job for not being able to see much. Grim and expressionless, the skulls just seem to stare, row upon row, layer upon layer.

It's time for me to set the image down. And somehow Advent is helping me with that—for the real story of Advent is not found in wreaths or candles or Christmas cards. It's found in [what Episcopalians define as](#) the certain, sure, and reasonable hope of the resurrection—that dust and bones are not the end of the story.

Stark and haunting, the skulls remind me that Advent is a time of reminding ourselves that we know not when our days will end. It's a time of reminding ourselves that no matter what, Jesus is coming. No matter what, whether it be death or life or war or plagues or mass shootings, we are not alone. No matter what, we will not be abandoned. No matter what, when we take our last breath, Jesus will be there. God will be there. Those we have loved will be there.

As the angel Gabriel said, "[Do not be afraid.](#)"

*Originally posted at [Freeman's blog](#)*