

The Easter Effect: “Death Be not Proud”

This sermon was video recorded for Easter Day 2020. The texts for the day were Isaiah 65:17-25; I Corinthians 15:19-26; Matthew 27:62-28:10.

Among the Holy Sonnets of the English writer and Anglican priest John Donne are the words of that familiar poem entitled, “Death, Be not Proud”:

*Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.*

It's Thursday evening in the sanctuary at Sts. Peter and Paul. There's been a fierce gust of wind from the north most of the day—a wind among the winds of winter's last stand. This, of course, is Maundy Thursday, the hour of every spring season when we, together with the whole church, begin The Great Three Days journey with our Lord Jesus, a journey that leads through death to life, through the cross to the resurrection.

Some call this the beginning of the Christian Passover as we also remember the Jewish Passover from slavery in Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land; but this year, on this evening, the sanctuary is empty, filled only with the glow of the setting sun. On this night, there will be no procession to the font for the laying on of hands and the individual pronouncement of forgiveness. We will not hear the beloved stories of the Hebrew exodus and of the self-giving service of our Lord Jesus on the night of his betrayal. There will be no tired feet present—feet to be washed and caressed as Jesus washed and caressed the feet of those whom he now calls his “friends.” And there will be no gathering around the Table with our Lord for his Last Supper among his friends.

So, I'm wondering whether or not Death is even more proud of itself this year than in the past since this year it has prevented Jews, Christians and Muslims across the globe from gathering together physically as communities of faith during our most sacred days of the year.

I've shared with some of you that I often have had disturbing dreams—“bad” dreams, I call them, about not being able to reach Sunday morning worship on time. These are “bad” realities, too, as some of you know. In these dreams, I can hear the piano beginning the Prelude. I see the other worship leaders seated in the chancel, craning their necks to catch sight of me. I peak through one of the sacristy doors and see a rather sizeable crowd in the sanctuary, but people appear to be getting restless because minutes have passed since the service was scheduled to begin.

There I am, frantically combing through the robes and vestments in the closet, unable to find anything that fits; and then, when I do find the right size, I realize that I'm putting it on backwards, wrestling with it as though I were trying to get out of a straight jacket. Finally, when it seems that I'm almost ready, I'm startled to realize that I've left my sermon at the parsonage.

As I dash for the house, I see people starting to leave the church and heading for their cars. I plead with them to have mercy and to give me just a few more minutes.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can!” I shout, “Please, please give me just a little more time!”

This has been a recurring dream for me throughout years of ministry; but now that I think of it, I have never dreamed of an entire congregation not being able to get to worship. And even though I have often rehearsed sermons on Saturday evenings alone in this space, I have never imagined what it would be like not to be here with you, especially during these most holy and precious days of the year.

Yes, I think Death surely must be very proud of itself this year.

Since the middle of December we have seen Death on the move. We have seen it magnified. We have witnessed it crossing every border. We have experienced Death exceeding all boundaries. We have recoiled as Death has deflected all efforts to subdue it. And now, it appears that Death has eclipsed even Easter as we have always known it. Very few souls living today have ever experienced an Easter like this one. One would have to go back over 100 years to the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918-19 to find churches closed on Easter.

The grand and glorious Easter Day has always been marked by the gathering crowds—friends and family from far and near—filling sanctuaries with choruses of “Jesus Christ Is Risen Today” and the victorious sound of the trumpet announcing the first sign of Easter dawn. The grand and glorious Easter Day beckoning us with the aroma of breakfast blended with the sweet scent of lilies, hyacinths and tulips. We see the resounding parade, welcoming the appearance of the long-buried “Alleluia!” and the floral cross rising up through springtime surrounded by joyous hearts filled with promise and hope for the future. But this year, all seems to be missing—all except, of course, the empty tomb which stands before us.

Easter this year is an empty tomb.

Is this not what the first witnesses of the resurrection encountered—an empty tomb—there when they went carrying their spices early on the first day of the week? They did not see Jesus raised from the dead. No one, as far as we know, actually saw how and when the resurrection happened—no one, with the possible exception of the angel who, in Matthew’s Gospel, “came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.” (I like that detail: the angel “sat on it” like some pigeon sitting on a statue.)

This is an empty tomb. But the tomb is not silent. The voice that is heard at the tomb announces to the women what has already happened earlier that morning, assuring them, as angels do, “Don’t be afraid... .”

As dramatic as Matthew’s telling of the resurrection is, replete with earthquakes and an angel, we soon realize that the resurrection has already taken place in the darkness while the tomb was still locked and the guards have fainted. All has happened by the time Mary Magdalene and the other Mary get there. There are no finely dressed crowds; and no children with bow ties and Easter bonnets. There’s no egg casserole or fruit salads. No singing and shouting. There’s no sound of the trumpet. There are no Easter egg hunts beneath the magnolias. All this seems to lie somewhere deep in the future. The two Marys encounter none of this.

As in the other gospels, here we do not actually have a “resurrection story.” What we have is a “post-resurrection story.” Then come the orders from the messenger: “Go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He’s been raised from the dead, and indeed he’s going ahead of you to Galilee; there you’ll see him.’ This is my message for you.”

This is our message for you, Death: “Death, be not proud... Death, thou shalt die.”

Come Easter dawn, the risen Jesus is already on the move, and he’s on the move with us. Having left death behind, he’s returning to that place called “Galilee of the Gentiles,” that place where the borders between Jewish and Gentile are skewed. Both the prophet Isaiah and the Gospel of Matthew emphatically proclaim that the light which shines from Israel’s Messiah is to be a light that shines into the darkness and the sickness of all the world. Like the angel, the risen Jesus meets us outside the empty

tomb, wherever we may be today, and reassures us, “Don’t be afraid.”

Here is the Easter effect upon those who were there after the resurrection of Jesus outside the empty tomb. What we will see here is the blossoming of Easter in the lives of people like us. As Paul says, the resurrection of Jesus is the “first fruits” of what God intends for creation, transforming the world, banishing all sickness, healing the wounded, comforting the grieving, rescuing the endangered, feeding the multitudes, making whole the impaired, providing hope to the despairing, wiping away every tear and moving us from death to life until, as the prophet Habakkuk says, “the glory of the Lord will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea.”

We believe, but we do not yet understand. We believe in the resurrection, but we do not yet understand the ongoing, proud cruelty of death. But—“One short sleep past, we wake eternally / And death shall be no more; / Death, thou shalt die.”

“Let no one fear death,” preached John Chrysostom in an early Easter sermon, “for the death of our Savior has set us free... For [death] grabbed a body and discovered God. It took earth and behold, it encountered heaven. It took what was visible, and was overcome by what was invisible.”

What about Easter this year? Old Testament scholar William Brown has suggested, “Let us make this Easter profoundly memorable by celebrating the ‘empty tomb,’ by letting our sacred gathering places remain empty as testimony that lives are being saved in doing so. The empty tomb, after all,” Brown reminds us, “marked the beginning of the Resurrection. So, let’s linger over it this year; let’s revel in it. ...Let us follow the science as we follow Christ from the cross to the empty tomb that is emptied of death.”

So, my dear loved ones, my sisters and my brothers, we are physically separated and socially distanced—certainly not by choice—but for the sake of saving lives. For this year, let the empty tomb speak. Let it speak of life in these days and life in the days to come. Let it speak life in all those places where we are tending to Easter effects in a Good Friday world.

Not long before his own death, Father Henri Nouwen wrote, “We are afraid of a lot of things, most of all, we are afraid of death. This fear takes away our freedom,” he said, “but when we can reach beyond our fears to the One who loves us with a love that was there before we were born, and will be there after we die, then nothing will be able to take away our freedom.” God can always open the future, even when all around us seem hopeless, “when all other lights have gone out.”

At the close of the funeral service for Winston Churchill—a liturgy which he himself had planned—a single trumpeter stood at the west end of St. Paul’s Abby and sounded “Taps,” the song that signals dusk and the close of another day, frequently played at the conclusion of a military funeral. Then, after a moment of stillness, following the final plaintive note of “Taps,” another trumpeter stood at the east end of St. Paul’s, the end that faces the rising sun. That trumpeter played “Reveille,” the song of the morning and the call to a new day.

“The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard and keep your hearts in Christ Jesus.”—*djl*