

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Reverend Barbara Hutchinson
The Fifth Sunday of Lent Year A
April 6, 2014

Many of you have heard me speak of my dear friend, who was diagnosed with a recurrence of cancer shortly before I left St. Stephen's in Port Washington. As I pray for her daily, we too as a parish, pray for her weekly in our Prayers of the People. Many of you have been kind to ask me from time to time how she is and I am always grateful for your spirit of generosity which has drawn her into our circle of caring here at St. Andrew's. My walk with her through her illness is one that is very similar to the one I walked with my uncle during his abrupt, but then lengthy decline to his death. Those fighting for life and those entering into death teach us so much about ourselves and about God and contribute so integrally to our spiritual lives and journeys.

A few weeks I visited my friend, who will soon complete her third year of nearly constant chemo treatments. Week after week, she pulls herself up to get out the door and continue the fight against the cancer within her body. Just to relieve your minds, she has made progress at keeping the cancer at bay and although her doctors are not talking about a period of remission, nor a time when she won't undergo chemo to stay alive, she is alive now and has been transformed by the experience. One might say, through Jesus' healing touch, her life has been resuscitated, as was Lazarus' in our story today.

She and I often have conversations about death; often focusing on when she'll know when to let go of life; what will the final days or moments be like; what it will be like the passage from life to death; and paramount to her, how can she care for those she loves whom she will leave behind.

Since we've begun these conversations, she has always referred to the cancer within her body as the manifestation of evil. She truly believes the cancer cells are working in opposition to the force within her that moves her toward life. As she believes there is evil within her, as she receives the chemo drugs, she holds the visual picture of the light of Christ filling her body, eradicating the hold of evil within her. It has been a very interesting dynamic for her to feel within her this battle between good and evil; the light of Christ fighting against the force of destruction.

Although I would never discount her understanding, nor challenge her perception of the nature of her illness, yet after hearing her again share this notion of a cosmic battle occurring within her, I thought it was time to pull the thinking apart a bit with her. After all, the reality is someday the cancer will win; the cancer will consume her body or she will die from the side effects of the chemo. I wonder, how will she feel then? Will she believe she has succumbed to the evil force within her and that the devil has won? For on that day when she can no longer pull herself up to receive another treatment, will she believe she has allowed evil to win and will she bring

that horror to her grave? For that seems to be the logical consequence of putting cancer and evil as an opposite God's desire of love and life for us. If she dies of cancer, will she believe she has lost the battle, and so perhaps has God? That would be such a tragic state for a truly faithful person to enter into right before her death.

I wanted to unwrap with her the fullness of the gift of life, which I believe actually includes and is not the opposite of death. For of course I don't believe for a moment that God will be the loser of the cosmic battle raging within her body. I believe God will win, even and especially when she dies. I know that partly because of our scripture today. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Jesus showed that God's power is stronger than anything, even death. So she and I talked about this scripture and the readings from Paul who states there is nothing, not even death that can separate us from the love of God. God's love will be with her at the end and evil will be eradicated.

I also recounted to my friend the experience I had when my father died, when a few hours before his body died, his spirit left, and there was this all-consuming force of love, which permeated every inch of the hospice room in which he lay. God showed up with a force of love more powerful than our hearts and minds could ever imagine, and I believe that divine love was the only reality in that moment. Whatever else had laid in my father's body, mind, or soul, it was consumed by God's love.

It is my deep and faithful belief that she will not succumb to the evil; instead she will succumb to the goodness of God, which will make the evil meaningless.

Part of my desire to talk through with her the over-powering force of God's love in her life and in her death was to ease her fear of the state of her soul as she would let go of life to embrace death. Part of my desire too was to speak with her of her deepest fear of her non-being. For isn't this what we all struggle to comprehend: the world without our live within it? My friend has a nephew she s deeply devoted to. I know she struggles with the question: what will his world be like without her in it. It seems to me what we as people fear most is non-being. Yet what is profound and life giving about Christian belief is that death does not take away our being. When we die, we are still ourselves. Resurrection makes us different, but we are not gone. Yes, of course we're gone in a physical sense from this world, but our essence, our soul, the love we poured out into our world, is not gone. Christians know that even though we die, we are alive in whatever mysterious way that will be. But we still are. And in death we are in the nearer presence of God. And some theologians, such as C.S. Lewis, in his book, *The Great Divorce*, also believe that we continue to grow and become more real in the light of Christ after our death.

With this knowledge then that at this transition from life to death, God's love consumes our souls and transforms us into something new, the sting of death is truly taken away. The raising of Lazarus prepares the people of God for the wondrous truth of the resurrection of Jesus, which we will celebrate in two weeks

from today, and the implication of the resurrection for us; they who believe will never die; it is death that has died; and we are an Alleluia people, who even at the grave can sing.

The truth of our gospel story today is that both our life and our death are held within God's embrace. We shouldn't conflate them nor understand them to be the same thing. But God's love flows through all things, including life and death and therefore all things are held together with the divine. This is why God can bring life out of death. They both belong to God.

I think this concept that life and death are not polar opposites as we so often view them, but actually are connected in that God rules over both has several implications for us.

First of all, if we no longer need to fear death, then we can actually live. Live the abundant life that Jesus desires for us. We can be the resurrected people. We can embrace the goodness in front of us, instead of clinging to the idea that it may be taken away or there isn't enough to truly satisfy us. We can spend our life thanking God, rather than railing against God or wondering where God is. We can take risks for the gospel, and we can, as is popularly quoted:

“Dance as though no one is watching you,
Love as though you have never been hurt before,
Sing as though no one can hear you,
Live as though heaven is on earth.

The idea that we no longer need to fear death then raises the question, are we open to the true gift of life? Can we live, as we are called by Christ, to live fully, abundantly, truly, lovingly, deeply ~~ starting now? Jesus does not say, “I will be the resurrection and the life.” But I am. Today. Tomorrow. Every day. Eternal life is now. One of the questions for us to ponder is: Can you embrace it this moment?

Clearly for my friend, who imagines her life in 3-month segments, from PET scan to PET scan, who lives in the valley of the shadow of death each day, has lived more fully, more abundantly, and more truly than ever before. She teaches me a great deal about being a faithful Christian.

The second implication of this concept of life and death being held not as the same, but within the same living and loving God, can be that to truly move from one existence to another, from birth to life, from life to death, from life to renewed life, or from feeling dead at a diagnosis and finding life again, requires transformation. We need to let go of one, to find the other. Sometimes that means we must unbind ourselves of that which holds us back. That which guards our soul. That which keeps us from being vulnerable. That which roots us in fear.

This is one reason we meditate. It is the daily practice of letting go. There are many spiritual thresholds we need to cross along the way. We can do it unwillingly, begrudgingly, or cautiously. Or we can do it peacefully, joyfully, hopefully.

I think the more we practice letting go, the more we have muscle memory of releasing, of letting go and letting God, the more we will be able to trust that God is on the side of whatever bridge we must cross. In this last few weeks of Lent, I pray you will be able to unbind your heart, so you may fully embrace, not only the resurrected Christ, but the resurrected YOU on Easter morning.

It's rather ironic, isn't it, that Jesus gives life to people and as a consequence of this healing act, the people give death to Jesus. In the synoptic gospels, it is Jesus' turning over the money changing tables in the temple which is the final straw that draws the crowds into yelling crucify him, crucify him. In John's gospel, the story of this exceptional miracle leads to a story of death. The narrative tension toward the cross has been building to this dramatic apex, so that Jesus' self-proclamation, "I am the resurrection and the life" at the raising of Lazarus sets in motion the passion of Jesus.

We begin a walk next Sunday, which will begin by singing our praises of the glory of God, and will abruptly change as we recount the passion of Christ. As Christ, through our walk to the cross, we will be transformed: unbound, released, and made new. May we understand all that we do these next two weeks, all that we are, and all that we experience: the depths of joy and sorrow, the peaks and valleys we traverse, the certainty and the uncertainty with which we enter into each moment, will be held in loving embrace of God, and will lead us to renewed and abundant life.

Amen.