

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
Third Sunday in Easter Year C

I'm somewhat on autopilot. I walk through the admittance area of St. Francis Hospital into the elevator on the right hand side of the hall, push the metallic circle, marked 4, and begin the ascent to a floor with which I am more than familiar. I nod to the nurses I know and I seem drawn to the room that is calling me. Having received the request of the senior warden of the parish I was serving, I walked into a room full of unfamiliar people who had described themselves as "not-recently churched people," but who were faced with a death in their family, and had asked that I come to give their beloved matriarch "last rites." I paused to pray before entering into the uncertainty of what I might find within the room. I called upon the Holy Spirit to give me the words that would bring this family comfort and rest. If they also heard my message of hope and resurrection that would be all for the better, but I'm not sure if that was what I expected. As I opened the door and peered inside, I immediately sensed that the energy was high. The chatter was intense. The hope of continuing life, not resurrected life was palpable. This situation seemed incongruous with what I was asked to do. Aren't last rites given when death is imminent? So how do I make sense of this situation? I do it by being present to what is in front of me. I introduce myself. I hold hands, respond to smiles, draw the family together in prayer, and wonder a lot about what's going on. I offer the beautiful prayers designed for the time of death in our Book of Common Prayer, I provide the family members my contact information, I walk down the hall, and I wonder a lot about what's going on.

Hours, the anticipated remains of Francis' life, unfolded into days, and then weeks. I came nearly every day, sometimes intentionally to meet with her son, Jerry, who camped out in her room, bringing his laptop and working, while also holding vigil with his dying mother. At times, the marvelous granddaughters, whom I grew to love, were there with their children, singing their grandmother's favorite songs to her, showing her photo album after photo album of images of their lives together, filling her room with the fragrance of multiple flower arrangements, often with balloons bearing uplifting messages. I met their joyous faces when they told me that today Francis had eaten spoonfuls of applesauce, and hope was written in bold letters on their foreheads.

I sometimes showed up late at night, when I knew all family would have left, so I could spend some quiet moments in prayer, making the sign of the cross on Francis' forehead, surrendering my soul into a prayer of offering a loved one's life into the eternal force of love.

Then one day it happened. The laughter ceased. The chatter quieted. The songs were sung, but at a different volume. Everyone still showed up, as often as ever, but peace settled into the room. The energy shifted from resisting death to

becoming at peace with death. We prayed more. We sat more. We listened more. And ultimately we all grew to welcome death.

I offered this dear soul last rites three times. At first, when the panic hit the family that death is actually coming; secondly when the family came to peace that death is actually coming; and finally when death actually came, when the family was ready to welcome death.

At every burial service in the Episcopal Church, we conclude by saying, alleluia. Christ is risen. I always believe that statement when I say it. I always believe this, because, indeed, as God raised Jesus from the dead, we too are offered something entirely wonderful and different upon our deaths. Life is changed, not ended.

However, sometimes it's easier and sometimes harder to actually feel the Alleluias at that moment. There are times when I've been here with you that it's been challenge to say those words because of my own love and grief at the loss of the person whose life we are celebrating. But, at Francis' death, I shouted these words with clarity and certainty – for over those three weeks, I saw the family move into the alleluia state. They faced their worst fear, their mother's or grandmother's or great-grandmother's death, the end of an era, the loss of a matriarch, and, in walking into and through that worst place of fear, and they claimed and began living the resurrection.

This is the message we hear in our reading from Acts today in the commitment of Ananias to meet his worst fear: having been directed by God to search out and deliver a message to Saul, a known persecutor of Jewish Christians, of which he was one, and in doing so, he encountered the risen Christ and drew forward the kingdom of God. With his words, "Here I am Lord", the typical response of any good Hebrew prophet, he changes his life and that of Saul's, and sets free the early missionary work of the church through Paul's evangelism.

The charge to Ananias and to us is not to imagine a conversation with the other, nor to look at the other from the opposite side of the room, nor to hold at arms-length our greatest fear or worst enemy. God commanded Ananias, and is commanding us, to lay hands upon, to bless, to confer the grace of God upon our greatest fear or worst enemy. This command tells us something very important about God and our Christian faith: reconciliation is at the heart, and it's an intimate act. For, as our story today unfolds, Ananias took the Lord's command one step further and began the conversation with Saul by calling him brother. Ananias moved from fear of Saul to the peace of obeying God, to welcoming the "other".

Our passage today invites us to identify what our worst fear or enemy is so we can move from fear to reconciliation. Sometime it is our own or someone else's death we fear the most, and our journey involves finding a way to bless it and welcome it. Sometimes it is a fear or something within us that we need to face and

move beyond, so that we can be reconciled within our own being; it can be those negative statements that recur, seemingly without our intention, the voices that say, "I'll never be good enough. I'll never be loved enough. My children will never become enough. My life will never be enough." When you find your worst enemy within, I invite you to allow the grace of God to touch you and bless you and make you whole.

Sometimes, our worst enemy or fear involves someone we live closely with or work alongside with, and it is the relationship that needs to be tended to, and like Ananias, we need to find within ourselves the strength to lay hands upon it and work toward reconciliation.

Our worst fears can appear within ourselves, within those closely connected with us or centered on the larger issues such as the uncertainty of our world. But the reality is that, from the beginning of the church, in the story of the Acts of the Apostles, we are called to name, claim, and make holy, that which we see as our worst enemy or our greatest fear. This is challenging, but I believe necessary for it is work that brings us into an awareness of the whole picture of God's kingdom.

If we do this healing and reconciling work, when we come to grips with and become at peace with what we fear most or with our worst enemy, and we invite Jesus into picture, we will find a fullness present that is God.

I saw this recently show up in my life. As you know, over the past few years, God has drawn me into a passionate ministry tending to souls of victims of abuse through my volunteer at Women in Need. Weekly, I meet women at Roxbury Treatment Center who are victims of abuse. I hear their horrid stories and listen to the unimaginable degradation they have experienced and my heart breaks for them. Interestingly, God has also drawn me into a ministry to tend to the souls of people at the Franklin County Jail. Recently, an Episcopal priest reached out to me and asked me to visit with his son who was there under protective custody and facing a federal prison charge of a minimum of 25 years. This past Friday, on my fourth visit with this person, he looked me squarely in the eyes and told me he was a sex offender. The interesting part to me was that, from the moment I met this young man, it was with a heart of compassion and that hasn't changed now that I know his offense. I believe that this is part of God's work for me to see the whole picture, to see in my heart the abused and the abuser and to lay hands upon them both, bless them, and confer the grace of God to bring each into a place of reconciliation and wholeness.

Search within yourselves. Find your worst fear and unite it with your best hope and let God do the reconciliation needed. Search within your relationships. Find the place where prejudices, fears, or a desire to control erupt, the places you need to lay hands upon, and let God do the reconciliation needed. Search within our global world, find the places of distrust and angst, and raise them up to God, allowing God to work on the needed reconciliation.

There is no doubt that the paradoxes of Jesus are immense and ongoing. But this is a major one. When we move out of our comfort zone, when we face our worst fears or enemies, not with resistance but with welcome, not with anger, but by laying hands upon them, not with power and control, but with blessing, we experience the fullness God desires for us. Scales fall off our eyes and we see the light of Christ. Alleluia.