

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

Happy Easter! Yes, we are still in the 50 days of the Easter season and we are continuing to celebrate and think about the resurrection. Our Rector, Fr. Mark, has made it a point that we ought to preach about resurrection every Sunday during Eastertide and so today is no exception. It does remind me a bit of a story I was told about of a man who attended church one week and became increasingly agitated with the message. On the way out he stopped to speak to the Pastor. He said, "You really have to do something about your sermons. You speak about the same topic every time I am here." And the pastor said, "Well, you only come on Easter Sunday." So – if you have been to St. James this Easter season you know we're on this topic until Pentecost....but it is certainly a rich and beautiful topic – resurrection.

One of my favorite portions of Paul's letter to the Corinthians is when he speaks about the importance of resurrection in those famous words, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" Death, from the perspective of the New Testament, no longer holds the power it once did over us. Yes, we will die – but the sense of finality is gone – death is never the end of the story in light of the resurrection. And so its sting is gone forever.

This language of stings and stinging is important to me because I'm very allergic to bee stings and the sting of a bee could literally kill me. I have to carry an Epi-pen around with me but still, bees terrify me on some level when I see them. And I read the story recently of a little boy and his father who were driving when suddenly, out of nowhere a bee flew in the car window. The little boy, like me, was deathly allergic to bee stings, and so he became petrified. His father quickly reached out, grabbed the bee, squeezed it in his hand, and then released it. As he let it go the little boy became frantic again as it buzzed by him. The father then stretched out his hand and pointed. There, stuck in his skin was the stinger of the bee. "You see this?" he asked.

You don't need to be afraid anymore. I've taken the sting for you."

God in Christ has removed the sting of death through the power of the resurrection. And so I'd like to invite you to just keep that visual image in your mind as we walk through the reading we had today from the book of Revelation.

We have been reading Revelation this Easter season and it focuses on death, new life and resurrection. We don't read this book literally in the Episcopal Church - it is written from a symbolic perspective and, while we don't understand a lot of the symbols' meanings because they have been lost to time, some symbols are still clear and obvious and they are here to remind us to continue to have hope for the future. Revelation isn't literal but it offers us truth about the end of time - much like the mystic Julian of Norwich who shared her message from God saying, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner things shall be well" at the very end. And these passages in Revelation are a beautiful glimpse into the promise that those who have died will rise again and dwell in the heavenly Jerusalem – a city who has no need for the sun or the moon, a city whose light emanates from the glory of Almighty God and the Lamb. In this city a river runs through it and on either side grows the tree of life –not just one tree, but many trees of life who produce fruit and whose leaves bring healing to the nations. The tree of life is an ancient and powerful symbol of resurrection. We first are told of the Tree of Life in the very beginning in the book of Genesis in the Garden of Eden, we hear of it again in the prophet Ezekiel, and we see it again here in Revelation at the end of time. This holy, life giving, healing cosmic tree connects all forms of life and creation and is considered a symbol and source of eternal life. The tree of life shows up over and over again throughout the world's religions and it is always a symbol of life – and of life triumphing over death. It is a symbol of hope – reminding us that the sting of death has been removed. And so even though death is tragic – it is not the end of the story. Life wins! And we're invited to imagine a future, like

the image painted for us in Revelation, of that place where there are no more tears or crying, neither sorrow nor dying -but joy and life everlasting – where the light always shines and the darkness has been overcome through the power of resurrection.

A few weeks ago in my sermon I invited you to share your resurrection stories and I shared one of mine - – the story of when I gave birth to Graysen five years ago. He was born not breathing and, for all intents and purposes, had died during the birthing process with the cord wrapped around his neck three times. However, the NICU team was there and our prayers were answered when they quite literally brought him back to life and I witnessed that resurrection with my own eyes. It was an immediate experience of resurrection.

But not all, in fact most stories of resurrection do not end that way. Most of the time when death overtakes someone, that's it...and we have to do the hard work of grieving the loss of our loved one. We could say there's a long pause after death – and all we have is the hope of resurrection one day in the future. So while, with Graysen I had a rather immediate experience of resurrection, I've also had the opposite experience. In fact, before Graysen was born, I lost a baby girl named Annabelle during my pregnancy who died due to complications with Trisomy 13. However, I was given an extraordinary gift later when I encountered Annabelle in a very vivid dream- and that dream helped lift me out of my sorrow and grief. For me, it was another kind of resurrection story – related to the promise of resurrection – and that dream and the hope it brought, helped relieve the sting of her death.

Three weeks ago I spoke to the Daughters of the King at their assembly about the ancient Christian Celts and their belief in “thin places.” These thin places are where the space between the material and spiritual is very thin – as though the veil that separates us is hardly there at all. My dream of Annabelle felt like a thin place – and some would say that sleep itself is a thin place. But there are many other thin places...this church itself often

feels like a thin place – and the book of Revelation has within it an invitation to recognize that we all live and dwell in thin places.

I think Leighton Ford, a minister and former associate to Billy Graham grasped the vision that Revelation offers us, not only of what it means that the sting of death had been removed, but that there is indeed a thin place between this world and the next when he began to imagine what he would say to his son Sandy, who died an untimely death. Leighton began to write letters to his son and as he wrote through his grief, he began to imagine what his son would say to him in response...the responses were quite vivid at times.

In one of these imaginary conversations, Leighton wrote:

“Sandy, I sure do miss you. I think about you more now than I did when you were here on earth.”
“I know you do dad, and I hear those thoughts”
“I guess I'm just afraid that as our time goes on here, that I'll lose the sense of nearness we once had.”
“But why?” Sandy responded, “It's just like one big long day here, dad, and besides that, you're not moving away from me, you're moving toward me. And the wall between us is so thin, you would laugh if you could see it.”
“Thanks son, it's getting late, I'd better get to bed. Enjoy the stars.”
“It's day here dad, enjoy the light.”

My friends- look for the light of resurrection everywhere you go – God's life and light are in our midst and hope is ours – the sting of death has been removed and we have cause to celebrate - because Christ is risen! Thanks be to God.