

EASTER – MARCH 27, 2005
Grace Episcopal Church, Haddonfield, New Jersey
Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

This is a great day. It is filled with joy! We peer into the very nature of God. What we see there is new life! Our God is one who creates life! This is God's way. Every Sunday is an Easter for us. Every time we gather to worship, this is the EVENT that we remember and celebrate.

It is an awesome task for me to preach today. I approach it with fear and trembling! What words could I possibly use that would help explain today? Jesus has already done it all ... he has lived and died for us. Now God has raised him ... we have the Resurrection ... the newest expression of God's life. Death is no longer the last word! God has acted and God has the last word!

Often in our lives, the last word is the most important. I came across a story (Synthesis, March issue) that illustrates this point. It captures some of the importance of God's answer to death. The Resurrection has power and can transform us. Stories can capture the sense of joy that we experience and celebrate today.

This story has to do with the way the news of the victory at Waterloo first arrived in England. There was no television, telephone, internet or even telegraphs. People knew General Wellington was facing Napoleon in a great battle. The future of England was up for grabs.

A sailing ship reached England to semaphore the news. This was a system of communication that relied on the use of signals sent with coded flags. The signalman sent the news from the ship to the signalman at Winchester Cathedra. From there it was sent from station to station to London. From here it would be sent throughout the country.

The first word was received ... "Wellington" ... The second word was then sent ... "defeated." A heavy fog rolled in and hid the ship from the signalman's view. He sent the message on ... "Wellington defeated." This message traveled all across England. A deep, heavy gloom settled over the English people.

Three hours later the fog lifted on the water. The ship sent the entire message ... "Wellington defeated the enemy." This message raced across the country. The English rejoiced!

The three-day wait for Jesus while he was in the tomb must have been like the first message. Jesus' disciples were stricken with grief and gloom. Death seemed to be the answer to Jesus' life and ministry. But God had the last word ... Resurrection! Too often we only get part of the message. Easter is about the last word from God!

We live in a world where we only get part of the message. As a result, we wander around in a deep gloom. Many of us have been watching the Terry Shavio story. In its own

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way, it has focused us on life and death during this Holy Week. The culture gives us mixed messages. A husband says, let her die ... that is what she wants. Parents say, she wants to live. We will never know what Terry wanted because she can't speak for herself. It is a sad situation. How often do we hear from society that we must avoid death at all costs.

I have been asked what I think about the situation. I too have mixed feelings. I don't like the government interfering with our private lives. It feels too much like a politician's game. I believe life is scared, a gift from God. But I also think death is scared. I am opposed to most forms of abortion, the death penalty and war. But I am troubled when I see people possibly "playing God". People making decisions on partial information, others threatening people with violence because they disagree ... this is crazy.

What do we believe about death and dying? What does our faith teach us? Everyone will die, but too many of us cling so hard ... it's almost as if they just will it hard enough ... death won't come! We can too easily become desparate as death approaches. What are we afraid of? Do we understand that God says death is not the last word for us?

I have spent many years in my ministry becoming acquainted with God's will around death and dying. I don't know all the answers, but I am beginning to understand some things. I have done 120 funerals since I have been here at Grace Church. Some of them involved hard decisions to let a person die. I perform the last rites, one of those times being this past Good Friday. People in our tradition understand something about preparing for death. I did my doctoral work on AIDS ministry. I worked and lived with people who knew their disease was a death sentence. I was a pastoral counselor to a hospice.

All these experiences and more have shaped my understanding of Easter. I do not fear death, it is part of the great cycle and mystery of life. I believe God has something to say about what happens after I die. People have been some of the most helpful teachers along the way. I remember Edith, in the nursing home, one day telling that she was saying goodbye. I misunderstood her ... it wasn't until I she told me that she would not be alive tomorrow that I appreciated what she was saying. I remember Jeannie, dying alone in a hospital, a victim of abuse and neglect, robbed of here life savings by a couple of con artists. She was afraid to die, and I told her it was okay to go. Then she said she saw an old friend, and I told her to go with the friend. She closed her eyes and drew her last breath. I remember Cornelius, laying in the hospice. I went to pray for him, but he grabbed my hands and prayed for me!

There have been countless others ... my parents, my grandparents, friends, relatives, and others. Into the cycle of birth, life and death ... God interposes the divine self. After all this, God has the last word ... and it is Resurrection!

Have you noticed the trees starting to show forth their buds? My crocus and daffodils are nearly ready to bloom. The forsythia are showing the bright yellow blossoms! Spring,

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new life is here! But I remember passing a tree recently. It was full of leaves, all brown! The leaves were clinging on and hadn't fallen last year. My friend told me the tree was dead. He said the leaves cling on in a desperate attempt but it is fruitless. There is no room for new growth. The tree is dying if not already dead. We will die. It matters not how hard we cling on. The question is, can we accept and believe that God has the last word? If we do, it has the power to transform us not only then ... but now!

On the first Easter, Mary went to the grave of Jesus. The gloom, grief and despair must have been a tremendous burden. When she arrived at the tomb ... she was met by an earthquake! An angel! An empty tomb! Resurrection is surprising! The angel says, "don't be afraid! He is risen! Go and tell the others!" Mary leaves filled with joy and fear, only to meet Jesus himself! She worships him and he tells her to go and tell the others!

That's what this day is for us. We are shocked and surprised around death! God says death will not be the last word! As spirit filled people, we are to go and tell others the Good News! We have hope, love, forgiveness, and new life through Jesus Christ! The Gospel is for all people! We share in that Risen life today! We share with in it our Baptisms. The Resurrection brings us a new set of values and a new demand for action.

We are called to be God centered people that look for Easter! It happens all around us, every day. God is present not just here at this moment in this liturgy ... but in every moment of our lives. Each of us experiences death and resurrection in little ways ... the lost and then finding a new job; an end to a relationship and the discovery of another; the death of a relative and the birth of a new baby in the family. Today, all these things come together at once ... the past and the future meet here right now!

Our journey is to Go and Tell to make Easter come alive for others. We are to carry the Good News that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead. God has the last word, not the courts, not the government, not even us. It is time to move out of the gloom cast by the shadow of death and embrace the light and life that God offers.

We are to be the angels for Jesus. We are to be the ones who proclaim that he is not here! Don't be afraid, God is with us! Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!