

4th Sunday of Easter
Year C - 12/5/2019

Acts 9:36-43
Psalm 23
Revelation 7:9-17
John 10:22-30

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

Last Sunday morning, I learned of the death of Rachel Held Evans, prominent American author and theologian. Rachel was only 37 years old, and died after a sudden and unexplained illness. In her short life she touched many people, including countless women who were led to challenge the norms of the strongly conservative Evangelical church to which Rachel belonged earlier in her life.

I have spent much of the last 30 years or so of my life surrounded in one way or another by death; my work as a nurse involved caring for many people as they died, or with people who were facing terminal illnesses. And I suppose it comes with the territory that, as a priest, you also deal with funerals, with grieving families, and have questions asked of you relating to death, and God, and heaven.

Of course, in the midst of personal tragedies we also have to deal with events that continue to happen throughout the world (the Sri Lanka massacre, gun deaths in the USA, Christians being slaughtered in Africa, Synagogue shootings, and the list goes on), all of which challenge our Eastertide proclamations of life being stronger than death. So it was, as I was reflecting on the readings for this Sunday that I read the story of Tabitha, and reflected on life coming out of death.

I have to say that I struggle sometimes to believe that life can come from death. Death always looks so powerful, so final, so complete. And the forces that produce it seem so inevitable and so unchangeable. Its approach makes me feel, at times, weak and helpless and depressed.

And as often as not, words of resurrection and hope have a hard time getting through to me through all of that. There is this whole build-up of life experiences that tell me that actually, yes, death wins, that tragedy is the end.

Part of the issue is my difficulty in trusting the words of resurrection. I struggle to accept in my heart what my head says it believes. Because in fact there is a great deal of sense to this notion of life coming out of death. Sometimes we do need something to die inside of us in order to accept more fully the life we are called to in Christ; sometimes, things have to die and be removed in order to create space for the new to spring forth. But it's so damn painful, to try and live in this in-between time, with this sense of promise that we have through our faith and how that comforts and sustains us in the here and now.

The book of Revelation is one of those odd bits of Scripture - not odd, in any pejorative sense, but odd in that there is really no other similar genre of writing in our canon - you see, it focuses on trying to "lift the veil" (hence its name) on our Christian hope, and to try and give us a voice, as a Church, to talk to people about this difficult space.

The church speaks in a different way to people living in the middle of time. The church looks at the continuum of time as we know and experience it, and sees it in the light of what we call "eschatological time." (or end times)

The church looks at the time we are living in now, and asserts that -- because we have glimpsed the future through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the coming of his spirit into the world; because God through Jesus Christ has begun the ongoing redemption of the ages -- all of our time, therefore, is charged with new possibility.

All of our time is permeated, from start to finish, with heavenly intervention. Having seen a glimpse of what God has in mind for the future of the world, we don't have to wait for that world to come in its fullness in order to begin living in it. We can start living triumphantly into that world now!

So, for Christians, it shouldn't be "just one more hurt after another." Even in the middle of this current time we can begin living out our lives in light of the promise of an expected future.

And so, today's reading describes how John sees a great crowd of people singing and dancing round the throne of God. One of the angels of God explains it to John:

“These are they who have come out of the great ordeal;
they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.
For this reason God will shelter them.
They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;
for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

God is doing new things. God is bringing life from suffering and death. But it won't always be the way we want it, or expect it. Christ promises us that death is not the final word, that Easter happens again and again as Christ breaks through the boundaries of our belief and creates life in new ways.

The question for me, and I think for many of us, is “Can we trust God in the face of tragedy? Can we believe that God can lead a person to springs of living water even as their body moves towards death? Or can we allow what we have created to pass away so that energies can be directed into God's new ways instead of our old ones? Can we trust, however falteringly, beyond the limits of our own experience?”

We have been strongly conditioned to believe only what we have seen with our eyes and touched with our hands. Even those of us who have been in church for a long time are often used to a sort of divided mindset where we choose to suspend our disbelief rather than actively trust.

Part of the good news is that God does not require us to have a 100% unshakeable faith before we can be accepted as God's children. Christ does not require that we have it all together and feel confident about everything before he will do anything good in our lives. Resurrection is happening. The Holy Spirit is active in the most deathly situations to bring about hope and life.

That's what this altar is about. We come here and remember a tragedy - the breaking of Christ - and we find here the makings of resurrection. As you receive the bread and wine you are receiving the life of Christ so that resurrection can take place in you. And it doesn't matter if your faith is weak or strong, Christ will be here, offering his life so that you may be freed from the power of death. God is here giving you life. Wherever death still threatens you or holds you captive, God is present for you, saying "Little child, get up, take my body, take my blood, and know resurrection and new life."

So accept Christ at this table, all of you. Especially if the powers of death and despair seem to be overpowering you at present. I know that I'm not feeling altogether confident in the face of death at the moment, and I need to encounter Christ in the midst of that. Each of you have your own places within that cry out in need for the life of Christ. The life of Christ is about to be put into your hands. Take eat, and know life.

"We have a choice: we can drive our hearses around bemoaning every augur of death, or we can trust that the same God who raised Jesus from the dead is busy making something new. As long as Christians are breaking the bread and pouring the wine, as long as we are healing the sick and baptizing sinners, as long as we are preaching the Word and paying attention, the church lives, and Jesus said even the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. We might as well trust him, since he knows a thing or two about the way out of the grave." [Rachel Held Evans; 1981-2019]

The Lord be with you.