

Easter Day 2019: Avoiding Death

Acts 10:34-43; I Corinthians 15:19-26; John 20:1-18

The Reverend Paul D. Allick, The Church of the Advent, April 21, 2019

I would like to think that I am not afraid to die. As a Christian why would I be? I believe that life is eternal. It will not simply be an ethereal soul that lives on but in the resurrection of the dead I will be raised in my full being. I won't be ghost Paul, I will be the real Paul. (no hashtag required.)

But I have to admit that I am afraid of dying. I am afraid of the process. It is the unknown that I dread.

In our culture we avoid death and we have become clinical in our grieving. We hold memorial services where we don't talk about death but stuff our pain and focus on the celebration of life.

Don't get me wrong, to want to live is a good thing but it cannot erase the reality that we are all going to die. We should talk about it more. We should learn how to grieve better.

We used to give ourselves a good space to grieve. We used to have wakes wherein we could gather to pray, tell stories, laugh, sing and weep. It used to last for days. Now we try to pack all of that into an hour liturgy. I am often asked to make the requiem mass into what I described as a wake with holy communion tacked on the end. The requiem is where we commend the deceased person to God. It is about God, not the deceased.

We should learn again how to prolong the grieving process so that we can say good-bye better.

Holy Week is about facing the death of Jesus. It is a prolonged process. On Maundy Thursday we share his last meal with him. We strip the Sanctuary and Altar of their accoutrements so as to feel the loss. On Good Friday we watch and weep with our Blessed Mother, the other women disciples, and the disciple whom Jesus loved. On Holy Saturday we gather at the Lord's Tomb.

It was an exhausting process but when it is over, we will feel better; we have gotten it all out and are then ready to celebrate life again.

We avoid death when we believe that this physical life is all that matters; as if there were no eternal life.

As St. Paul writes to the Church in Corinth, "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." In other words, if we are following Christ to make ourselves self-justified only for what we know in this world, then we are not living fully in Christ.

In Christ God forever calls us from the temporal into the eternal.

Today we remember when Jesus' disciples went to the tomb to anoint a dead body. They thought that it was all over. After they find it empty, they scatter in excitement and confusion.

Mary of Magdala stays behind. She is too grief stricken. Instead of seeing the resurrection she wants to explain it away by saying someone stole the body. She is confused and sad and needs someone to blame. She just knows that some higher-ups have stolen Jesus' body.

She is so wrapped up in this idea that she does not recognize the risen Christ standing in front of her.

Then he speaks her name. As she is recognized she recognizes. She rises out of the fear and suspicion that has caused her such despair.

Her first response is to hold onto the physical presence of Jesus. He tells her to not do that; she needs to go and tell others the Good News. As Mary is loved by Jesus she must go and love others in the same way.

In the second chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews we read that Jesus took on our human nature so that through his death he would destroy the devil who has the power of death. His death would deliver us who have spent our lives held captive by the fear of the death. (vs. 14-15)

Ignoring death will not save us from it. Only Jesus can do that. This is the truth that we marvel at today. We who have spent our lives avoiding that which we do not know how to face have been given a way where we assumed there was no way.

I fear death when I think I am in charge of life. When I let Jesus take charge, death no longer has dominion over me.

This Feast of the Resurrection calls us to remember in whose hands our lives are held. We can let go. God will take care of it. We are not captives. We are free to live.

This is the only true way to avoid death.