

2016 Easter Homily

We were not meant for death.

We weren't meant for pain, for suffering and sorrow and poverty and hoarding. We weren't meant for cancers and rotten teeth and heavy joints and sleepless nights, or the empty pleasures of addiction--empty calories, empty violence, empty lusts, empty worries.

The world wasn't meant to be worn away by us, even as our bodies wear away; creation wasn't meant to become our enemy, and the universe wasn't meant to depend on death and failure for growth. The fact that any good can come of death in this world is a mercy. There was never supposed to be a "circle of life," there was supposed to be, just, life. Good, persisting, for everything that aspirates, and all that in the presence of God.

But we know the story. Humanity sinned; we traded the presence of God for some food, like we trade a thousand good things for whatever hungers we have, and death had its way with us. And with death came fear, came the sense of our own mortality, came the hoarding and the getting and all the "musts" that come from too little time. Grief and loss and even differences that can't be reconciled because it's, well, it's easy to leave things unreconciled for decades, but harder when you keep bumping into someone forever.

Death took charge, took over, and we came to believe that death itself was the only escape from all the terrors that death itself brought on us. We have been its slaves, and with it, fear and sin and devouring. The world became a zero sum game, and for me to win, you have to lose. But even then, we just tricked ourselves into believing that winning until we died was worthwhile. But it isn't. We've been playing against death's house, and the house always wins.

But Jesus beat death. Jesus beat the house.

And a gambling metaphor falls apart, because gambling has to do with some odd mix of chance and skill, but Jesus overcame death, triumphed over death, not by chance and skill but by faithfulness, and obedience, and trust, and the Spirit of God alive in him.

And we who have the Spirit of God alive in us, who live with the same faithfulness and obedience and trust that Christ lived with, we will share in the glory of the risen Lord, which is his resurrection. Death will not triumph over us.

Paul tells us that this Spirit is not only our power from on high, but the very promise that Jesus' resurrection wasn't the only resurrection. It was the first of many to come; it's a ticket stub we hold, and we'll redeem it for bodies like his at his return.

We celebrate and remember the resurrection of Jesus

today. And it's something like children--or grown women, grown men--trying to describe love itself. On the one hand, it's this basic, simple thing; on the other, it's inexplicable, and impacts every aspect of who we are, who we have been, who we might be.

Without Jesus' resurrection, there is no Christianity; there is no hope beyond this life, with its pains and burdens and sins and terrors. But we are people who live in the hope of Jesus' resurrection, and our own.

And this trust in Jesus' resurrection, and the hope of it for our future, motivates our present. Paul writes to the Corinthian church, answering all sorts of questions they have about Jesus' resurrection and the mystery of their own, and after all this resurrection-talk, he writes, this:

"Therefore, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."

Our labor in the Lord is not in vain. Do we understand that? Our labor in the Lord is not in vain. Because of Jesus' return from the dead, nothing about our lives or what we might do with them is in vain, is meaningless, pointless. Death doesn't destroy our work.

The resurrection tells us instead that our lives are filled with meaning. Whatever we do with ourselves, in these bodies, this flesh that we've got--the things we say and do and what we eat and buy and give and

how we talk and why and how we play and why and how we work and why--it's all so important that God just can't let it go. He wants it for us, wants us to have bodies and all the stuff that goes along with them forever.

Except that he wants us to have them as they should have been--without illnesses, without pains, cancers, exhaustion and anxieties. Without all of death's derivatives. Think of a world where there is enough for all, and no fear. No estrangement, no grief, no great unmet longings or secreted away regrets.

It's true. We do die. We all have, as John Donne put it, one "short sleep" to pass through. And those who have died before us in the Lord even now are in the hand of God, at peace and rest. But even they look forward to what we look forward to, even they await what creation itself is groaning with longing for--Jesus' return, and death's death. The final death. Jesus was like the first bloom in spring, the first place, the first person where death-free creation--New Creation--was made real. And we who have the Spirit of God alive in us, we can say with Paul "If anyone is in Christ--New Creation!" Because we are ourselves little signs, little promises, that new creation is coming everywhere. There will come a day when Jesus' resurrection fans out and touches everyone and everything.

Jesus' resurrection, and our own that we look forward to, they call us to many things.

We are called to remember that we are surrounded by people who God wants to be with forever and ever. We are surrounded by those who will someday be immortal, and who, if we saw them as they will be, we would right now be tempted to worship.

We are called to live as if the old way of death is dying out. God validated Jesus' way of life when Jesus triumphed over death, and so we live like him now. We become agents of life, and we resist responding to hate with hate, to fear with fear, to violence with violence, to indifference with indifference. We make human the ones the world dehumanizes. We side with the ones the world rejects. We see for the ones the world blinds, and speak for those the world mutes. Instead of giving death back when it's given to us, we respond in love, safe in the promise that the love of God has put us beyond death's reach. We pray Good Friday's "Father, Forgive them for they know not what they do," because we live in the power of Easter Sunday's resurrection.

We are ourselves called to reach back into death, into this world and its death-loving ways, with peace, hope, love, joy, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control.

We are called to live for the Lord, like the Lord.

When Jesus showed up in that room with all those people who thought that their lives were over--their time wasted, hundreds of Facebook and Instagram

posts to delete--Jesus tells them "Peace be with you."

Hear that. Peace be with you. Peace be with us. God is far more powerful than we could ever imagine. Our work for the Lord will never be in vain; because nothing about us is in vain, is worthless.

Our worth comes from someone who faced death and won, so that we might do the same some day.

There will come a Day, after some of us or all of us have passed away, when we gather together again. We won't have to be reminded of Easter anymore, because we'll be living in the middle of it. And we'll eat, and drink, and be glad. Death will have had its funeral, and no one will have mourned it. All creation will be changed into glory, and "mourning, crying, and pain will be no more." Our hope will be realized, and our Easter promises come true.