

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
6 November 2016

Scripture readings:

Haggai 1:15b-2:9

Psalm 98

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Luke 20:27-38

You could ask almost any Christian what heaven is like, and they'll be glad to tell you. Some of you know that I don't wax as clear on the subject as some. Every time I'm asked, as I was this past week, to conduct a funeral, I am frankly caught up short because if the simple answers were answers of which I could be sure and of which *you* could be sure, then things would be simpler than they are. And they're not, are they? Some of you know that I don't respond to the Hallmark type of sympathy that is often purchased in sympathy cards. At the time of James' death I had some real difficulty with things like: "*He's not really dead. He's in the next room.*" Well, I wrote back to that person and said, "*He is dead. I went, I checked. He's not there.*"

We live with disturbing mysteries in our life. One of those mysteries is birth. Who can understand that? A woman turns herself inside out and creates another separate, complete human being. And at the end of life is this extraordinary mystery of death. At a funeral home on Friday morning there was a ten-week-old baby, Camille. Her mother is from Canada, and we had a lovely little chat, and my observation was, "*She's at the very beginning of the spectrum of life.*" We only had to walk through the room to the other end where an open coffin was lying, displaying the body of a woman who had completed her life - and I don't know the particular circumstances, frankly, but happily or not, I heard a very fine fatherly comment: the widower said to his sons - these are good words; remember them - "*This is natural.*" As you know, I am always brought to make the observation, not only at funerals, but here frequently. You can finish the sentence yourselves, you've heard it so often. "*Nobody gets out of here alive.*" That's for sure. You can bet on that.

So the mystery of birth and the mystery of death circumscribe, create brackets around our human existence, and I firmly believe that there's a mystery in between those two that we don't understand quite fully either, and that's the mystery of love. The Greeks found love so mysterious they created three words for it. We're a bit limited in our vocabulary with one word and then having to define what we mean by that.

Here we have this extraordinary exchange in the gospel today about an attempt to understand the mystery at the end of life which we are given to call occasionally, frequently and comfortably "*heaven.*" Apparently the Sadducees, or at least some of them, did not believe in a resurrection. Does that make you uncomfortable? It certainly isn't a Christian position, is it? The reason we gather here on Sundays every week is really to remember the resurrection. This liturgy is a copy of the prototypical liturgy which is the Easter Vigil when the Pascal Candle is lighted. A new candle is lighted from a new fire the night before Easter to remember the resurrection. The image is very clear, a very human image. The first hot wax from the Pascal Candle is spilled into the virgin waters of the font - impregnation of the Church. That's pretty raw imagery. Everybody can understand that one, right? The font, then, stands as the womb of the Church where Mother Church breaks water to give birth to her sons and daughters.

The image is also one of the watery grave in the font. Young parents don't like to hear this when you talk about in baptism we essentially bury the infant in a watery grave so that we have the promise that if we are buried with Christ in a death like his, we shall certainly be raised with him in a resurrection like his. And perhaps even more subtly, this fair linen on the altar, which you'll find on most altars in Christendom throughout the world, is customarily embroidered with five crosses. Why do you suppose? One nail in one hand, one nail in the other. The hands, the feet, and the side. Ahh, the shroud of Turin! Here we have an image of somebody who was buried in this cloth. The shroud of Turin is bunk. Who cares, even if it were? Would it be magic? The Church says this is a better shroud of Hamlin because this is a symbol of a living reality. All year long this cloth simply proclaims, "*He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! He is not here. He is risen!*" Subtle imagery, quietly made, of the Church's belief in the resurrection. The Easter candle burns all the way throughout the Easter season until Pentecost, and then it's lighted again at every baptism and at every funeral to

underwrite and underscore, to remind us and to keep the image alive of the Christian belief in the resurrection.

But now here is the rub: What do you mean by that? Of course the Sadducees had a reason not to believe in the resurrection because they had some problems. They came with an understanding, ancient rules and regulations that if a man died it was his brother's responsibility to produce children with his brother's widow. And so here's the extreme example: There are seven husbands. She finally dies. So whose wife is she? I'm glad we don't pay much attention to this rule anymore, and I cannot tell you how delighted I am, for more than one reason, that both of my brothers are still living! *[laughter]*

So there are these simplistic, Hallmark greeting card ideas about what we mean about resurrection. Let's be honest. In our history as the Church we've made hay on what it is we think about the resurrection and who's going where, right? So we buy our way out of hell. We pay up with good works. We try to make God like us by our good behavior. We try to stay friends with God for fear that if we're not, when we die we go to hell. There were even crazy ideas that if babies died without being baptized, they would go to hell. You know that stuff, don't you?

Well, Jesus says - and he does it in the kindest of ways... Someday when I get to sit down with Jesus, I want to know how he did this. He had the finest way of telling these people they had cockamamie, whacked-out ideas. He said, *"Well, you're not getting the point."* And so often we don't get the point. In the first place, I don't get the mystery of birth. In the second place, I don't get the mystery of death. I shared with the folks at the funeral on Friday a story about a seminary classmate of mine who lived across the hall from me. John was from North Carolina, and after I graduated I lost contact with him. We weren't that great of friends, but we knew and liked each other and lived near each other for a year. When I went back for my tenth anniversary reunion at Union Seminary in New York, I found out that John was still at the seminary but had become the head cataloging librarian of rare books and manuscripts. Now big deal - but it *is* a big deal because Union Seminary's library is the largest theological library in the world. He wasn't at the reunion and I made a phone contact and I found out that that was the very weekend that AIDS entered his life. We re-made and grew our friendship, and he knew that he was going to die, probably within the next five years. And he died right on schedule. I remember one time standing in my kitchen in my rectory in my first parish in North Bergen, and in my own flip and cocky manner and assured selfhood, I looked at him and said, *"Well, John, everybody's gonna die."* And John looked me straight in the face and said in his beautiful North Carolinian accent, *"Yep, but I'm really gonna die."* The imminence of death.

Mysteries are frightening. What we don't know scares us, having just pretended about fright with Halloween and all the rest of it. You know, it's felt by psychologists that the children's game peekaboo is sort of playing games with death. *"I'm not here. I'm here. I'm not here."* So much of what surrounds Halloween and *El Dia de Los Muertos*, the Day of the Dead, is our lack of comfort and desire to become more comfortable with what the widower said at the coffin to his sons: *"This is natural."* Natural or not, there is something about faith traditions which wants to know and at some times broker what happens after we die. I'm old enough now to be able to say to rooms full of people in churches and funeral homes, *"I don't know a thing about it. I've never been there."*

We like the claptrap. We like the assurance. We like to imagine. But one of the mysteries that we're given in our lives is that we've been given brains and hearts - but they are human brains and human hearts and, therefore, they are limited. So I think it may be our job to listen to Jesus today when he says, *"When you come with these cockamamie ideas about heaven, skip it. It's ridiculous! It's laughable. It's crazy. You don't know. You don't!"*

But the one thing that Jesus communicates so clearly, and he does it in his life, is that God is love. And love creates in a mystery and love cares throughout life, and the invitation is to believe that at the end of life love takes care of that as well and what is beyond. So the Christian Church evolves this idea about Jesus that in between the mysteries of birth and death we encounter a living God when we encounter love, when we share and receive love. And so the Church develops another possibly cockamamie idea that Jesus is God. That's where we get the Trinity - two men and a bird - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Where have all the women gone?

Well, there was a feminine aspect of God in the pre-Christian scriptures known as Sophia which was holy wisdom. The oldest church in Christendom in Constantinople in Turkey is the church Hagia Sophia, Holy Wisdom.

The point is this: We develop this theology that somehow Jesus is God present in this world with an alimentary canal and skin and bones and DNA. Wouldn't it be interesting if the shroud of Turin were real and we could get some blood samples and see what that DNA looked like - with a virgin mother. It would have been a haploid, and if it were a haploid...Now get this. This is biology: It would have had to have been a female. Half the number of chromosomes, the mother of the donor haploid, female genes. So theology is good at stuff like this. Theology says Jesus somehow, because of the way he understands the world and understands God's love for the creation, Jesus must be God. I don't really have any problem with that at all as long as we don't put a period at the end of that sentence, but a comma instead and say in all human flesh and existence exists the option, the possibility, the power for God to be present as any human being sends, receives and engages in loving another.

There was a prayer in the Lutheran liturgy, I think it was in the wedding liturgy, that said something about love - and surely in the wedding it involved carnal knowledge as well - "*whose love is known even where his name is not known.*" That's a nice exercise for Christians, isn't it? You don't have to beat anybody over the head with your well-thumped Bible to communicate what's in it. Love that other person instead and they won't have to be able to read your language.

And so Jesus says to the Sadducees, "*You're not getting it. You want to fit God inside of your tiny little mind and you end up with ridiculous ideas like this: Who's going to be married to whom? Or you're going to want to know what happens or - and here is the real danger - we're going to sit around and theologically create an image of heaven and where we're going and all the rest of it that's made in our image with our limited ability to see and understand things.*" And heaven is going to look like this which is backwards from what Jesus teaches us in the Lord's Prayer which is "*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done **on earth** as it is in heaven.*" So I think the radical instruction of Jesus is to create heaven here and now as best we can. And that's by exercising the mystery - and this is the mystery we can all agree to - the mystery of the creation, the mystery of the love of the Creator for all who are created, and the mystery of a love which is eternal, which cares for us even when the end of our days arrives. It's not our job to figure out what we cannot know. And how much of our religion has been constructed around what it is we think, believe and teach about heaven about which we know zero, while we ignore the rest of the world and all that we live in the world with and refuse or forget or don't educate ourselves to love each other and know God present in our own bodies in this world as we love each other.

Jesus isn't the only one who "*got it*" I don't think. That's why we come here regularly to remember the resurrection and to remember that every day of our lives we can participate in the resurrection by making God's love experienced in how we relate to each other. Two other people who really, really got it, I think, were Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., people who said you cannot create peace with violence. You must love those who are different from yourself, and you need not be afraid "*for lo, I am with you always, even to the end of your days*" which is not the end of God's days or the end of love or the end of anything except the end of our opportunity to share and communicate that love. That's when it ends for us.

So I think the invitation in the gospel today is don't worry so much about heaven, Believe what you pray when you pray the Lord's Prayer, that you're asking God to help us make God's will, God's presence, God's heaven on earth now in how we live and move and have our being in the neighborhood of this universe. And so I was delighted to hear the pope speak today about the support for the international conferences on the environment. I was delighted this week to see him in the cathedral in Sweden talking about working toward rapprochement with the churches of the Reformation, particularly the Lutheran Church. I know for a fact that for fifty years Lutherans and Roman Catholics have been in dialogue annually in Strasbourg, France. In the 80s I attended one of those conferences, and it's my intention, as some of you know, to go back to Strasbourg this coming July to another meeting of the Lutheran/Catholic dialogue there which occurs the first week in July every year.

The one I attended in the 80s was about Mary in the New Testament, the role of women in the Church. My one great disappointment in my buddy Frank is he reiterated what his predecessor, John Paul II, said about women. But at least he was in the cathedral with women clergy, and he's not finished yet. So who knows?

I think the message for today is a simple one, and we could do it in a sentence. Worry about here and now way more than you worry about then and there. Create heaven now or do the best you can. Enjoy the love that's yours from God which comes in sufficient and overwhelming quantities, and don't try to fit God into your head, but allow God to speak through your heart, and then that's what we call the incarnation - not just in one Jewish guy two thousand years ago, but in all of us together as we form what St. Paul calls the Body of Christ, the Church.

One footnote about incarnation: At Barbara Harlin's funeral on Friday I was astounded to learn that she had made gifts of her body to others, so we felt during her funeral that somebody was already seeing with her corneas. She made gifts of bone and gifts of skin in the interests of others. A letter from the recipient agency was read which made it very clear that there were some things that human skin could do that nobody else's could and all the rest of it. I was very moved by that and I'm pleased to share that sort of final salute from a Christian sister in the interests of others who she would never know and who her family won't know. What a gesture of the Body of Christ!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.