

All Souls' Day—Noon and Sung Mass at 6:00 PM

Church of Saint Mary The Virgin, Times Square

November 2, 2023

Propers: Wisdom 3:1–9; Psalm 23; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18;

John 5:24–27

by the Reverend James Ross Smith

The Book of Common Prayer tells us, “The liturgy for the dead is an Easter liturgy. It finds all its meaning in the resurrection. Because *Jesus* was raised from the dead, *we, too*, shall be raised” (Book of Common Prayer 507).

When the Prayer Book speaks of Easter in this way it is speaking about an event, an event that includes Good Friday, but is also a response to it, yes, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” But *also*, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He isn’t here, but has been raised” (Luke 24:6)

For Christians, resurrection is not just a hope for the future, though it is that. It is also the belief that resurrection has already happened: Jesus of Nazareth died, was raised, and is alive: “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live” (John 14:18–19). And because Jesus returned to us as the Risen Lord, we can experience resurrection’s power when we encounter Jesus. In other words, the resurrection of Jesus is not

just an idea. Resurrection is a past event that has an effect on us, even now: Sometimes we actually stop looking for the living among the dead. Suddenly, we feel it: Jesus is alive, present to us. Just like he promised.

Some of Jesus' earliest followers called their new life in Christ "the Way." In the Acts of the Apostles, if you were a disciple, you were on "the Way," you *belonged* to "the Way." Christians have often described their lives in terms of movement. We walk, follow, turn, stumble, get lost, get found, and someday, we hope, we rise. We follow, because Jesus invites us to follow, but following Jesus is a complicated thing. I sometimes think of it this way. When we follow Jesus, it's as if we are walking on a bridge between this world and another, a world that we can't see yet, but we believe it's there; and we call that other world eternal life, a world in which the bonds of time, sin, and death have been shattered. And while we're on that bridge, we are walking toward Jesus who is our hope, a promise for the future. It's the promise that Saint Paul makes to the Thessalonians in our second reading tonight. And it is the vision that the author of Revelation, who sometimes calls Jesus "the Lamb," shares with us when he writes, "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”
(Revelation 7:17).

And I think it is that vision, that promise, that hope, that brings us here today. We come here to honor our dead, to remember them, thank them, mourn them, and sometimes to wrestle with them; we come to pray for them and to ask them to pray for us. We want our loved ones to live, we want the dead who are gone from us to be comforted; we want Jesus, who died and rose, to wipe away *their* tears.

But that’s not the whole story, is it? Because when we walk *towards* Jesus on that bridge we are also walking *with* Jesus: “I won’t leave you as orphans. I will come to you. Soon the world will no longer see me, but you will see me.” Jesus promises not to abandon us. He comforts us in our grief. I don’t think it would be wrong to imagine him drying our eyes as well.

Jesus wept as he walked towards Lazarus’s tomb. He listened to Martha and heard her grief-stricken words. Jesus doesn’t remain untouched, unmoved, in that timeless place where there is no grief and there are no tears. He comes to us, wounded and yet victorious, in Word and Sacrament, in beauty and goodness, in the faces of the poor, in prayer and presence, in the power

of the Spirit, and in the experiences of the heart. In all of this, he comes to us, and he *consoles* us.

Consolation is such a beautiful word. To *console*, “to alleviate misery, to mitigate grief or anxiety, to offer solace, to encourage or comfort.” The writer, Michael Ignatieff, recently published a book entitled *On Consolation*. He writes, “The essential element of consolation is hope: the belief that we can recover from loss, defeat, and disappointment, and that the time that remains to us . . . offers us possibilities to start again, failing perhaps, but as [the playwright Samuel Beckett] said, failing better. It is this hope that allows us, even in the face of tragedy, to remain unbowed”¹ He goes on, “The Hebrew prophets begin this search for hope, and [so they] are the originators of the Western idea of consolation.”² This was Jesus’ faith and it is the faith to which we are called as well: to believe in hope and the possibility of consolation in a fractured, frightening, and divided world.

Saint Paul is comforting us tonight with his promise of Jesus’ triumphant return. But it’s interesting, isn’t it? He most certainly believes in that vision, he believes in the power of Jesus’ resurrection and in the *parousia* as deeply as anyone ever has, but he also believes that consolation and hope cannot just be words. He seems

¹ Ignatieff, Michael, *On Consolation: finding solace in dark times* (Metropolitan Books, 2021), p. 7.

² *On Consolation*, p. 10.

to be saying, sometimes we have to put flesh on those words. Paul puts it this way, “So *encourage* each other.” The word Paul uses here is the same Greek word from which we get the word Paraclete or Comforter. Those are Paul’s parting words for us tonight. Don’t grieve like people who have no hope. Let the Spirit of Jesus comfort you and then go and do likewise, console as you have been consoled; allow the Spirit to guide you, using words, and silence, listening and embrace, helping those who grieve to believe what they are so often afraid to believe, “...that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38).

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