

Life through Death

Easter 2015, Rob Gieselmann

We moved to Maryland in October of 2001, just before Halloween. The church I served, St. Paul's, and its rectory – the house we lived in – are situated in the middle of a large cemetery. Marked graves date to the early seventeenth century, and lore has it that unmarked graves hold the bodies of slaves.

Tate and Tilly – my children – were seven and four years-old, so I naturally assumed they would resist living in a cemetery – besides, it was almost Halloween - but neither child complained – the entire four years we lived there. To the contrary, they made the cemetery their playground; ancient boxwood with cavernous interiors became forts; ledger stones formed platforms for Star Wars light sabre battles with friends. You cannot imagine how much *life* my children experienced amidst all that death.

A friend, Susanna Metz, speaks of cemeteries as Celtic *thin* places. A place is *thin* when two worlds stand just a hair's breadth apart – *this close*. At cemeteries you *feel* the presence of ancestors; you *feel* something spiritual.

When you visit the cemeteries of historic Williamsburg, Boston or Charleston, the centuries seem to dissolve, and time becomes irrelevant. *You are there* – as though Alexander Hamilton or Thomas Jefferson died only yesterday. And *you just know* this *thinness* is why bent old men visit the gravesides of their deceased wives - the temporal and spatial vaporize, and they experience the **present** pang of love, not the **past**.

The three women - Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome – didn't visit Jesus' tomb *just* to anoint his body with spices – although common protocol insisted women do the job. These women *loved* Jesus. They gathered themselves amidst their grief early that third day following the crucifixion, so they could be *with* Jesus: To *feel* his presence, one more time, at the thin place of his tomb.

The ground was still wet with dew, wisps of faintly yellowed sun filtered through olive trees. Perhaps the women felt a slight breeze, but otherwise, all was quiet. The stilled world, bated with breath. When they arrived they saw the heavy stone, sealing the grave, removed. *Why would somebody move it?* They wondered. The women peeked inside, and in the darkened cave, they saw the incongruity of a young man, sitting there, dressed in a white robe: A messenger.

Up in my office, I keep a framed photograph I took of an African congregation when I was visiting Uganda. The people were dressed in drab colors - except – there was this one woman, right in the center of the picture, dressed completely in white; even her head was covered with a white turban. I had not noticed the woman when I took the picture – only later, after it was developed. An angel, perhaps, and here is this young man, dressed in white, sitting in a dark cave. Luke calls his clothes *brilliant* white. Matthew calls him an angel dressed in lightning, John – two angels. But Mark is more primitive - living closer to the earth like you and I do - describes a mere man, dressed in a white robe. He is an

allusion to another man in Mark's story, who also lived among tombs. He was demon-possessed, but Jesus cast the demons out. That man, in turn, told everybody he knew how Jesus had saved him. This man – the same man perhaps, in white following resurrection – also a messenger: "*This Jesus you seek is not dead, he is alive!*" the man exclaims. Alleluia! The Lord is Risen!

By the time she was in her seventies, my grandmother spoke euphemistically about her eventual death, which she seemed to think could come at any moment. *This will be the last car I ever buy*, she would say, so dramatically. My grandmother isn't the only one – Graduating seniors lament, *this will be our last football game!* Best men throw bachelor parties as a last hurrah for grooms.

Do you remember that Seals and Crofts song? *We may never pass this way again... You won't pass this way again.* Life is built brick upon brick, there is birth and death, and there is birth and death again.

The demon-possessed man shed his past among the tombs – He traded a black robe for white, death for life. I wouldn't be surprised to learn he played Star Wars on ledger stones.

*Last Sunday, I invited you to spend this past week considering your own mortality. I doubt many people did that – Seems morbid, but in fact, life follows death, not death life – death to life, the same as spring follows winter, and Easter follows Good Friday. Death is life's cornerstone.

Henri Nouwan wrote, *I have a deep sense that if we could ... befriend death, we would be[come] free people.*

Like the man in the tomb, new life – now: In this world. Jesus is Alive – and guess what? You don't have to be afraid of death – whatever form it takes: Literal, spiritual or emotional... Because death to the Christian is a mere passageway, not a terminal.

Into your hands I commend my spirit.

We are *Easter People*. The same God who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies, to your mortal souls... on this morning, of filtered light, and a damp ground. Simply believe!

Alleluia! The Lord is Risen! The Lord is Risen Indeed, Alleluia!