**“No Storm Can Shake My Inmost Calm”**

November 10, 2019 Text: Psalm 46:13, Isaiah 43:1-2

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A Catholic priest, Baptist preacher and an atheist walk into a bar. Somewhat sobered by the recent death of a mutual friend, one asked, “If you fell down lifeless right now, what would you want said about you?” Replied the priest, crossing himself, “He was a man of God who rightly administered the sacraments.” Said the Baptist, piously gazing heavenward, “She was a woman of God who faithfully preached the Word.” Chimed in the atheist, “Hey, look, he’s moving!”

Is there life after death? I am here today to tell you that yes, there is, and this can make for you all the difference in the world. Not just then, but now, here, today.

Country singer Kenny Chesney sings, “Everybody wants to go to heaven, have a mansion high above the clouds. Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to go now.”

Kenny was singing about me. I was in no hurry to leave behind this vale of tears. A week ago Tuesday I was at the gym, Fitness 500 over in Hyannis, as had been my habit these past eight years or so, usually three times a week. I had just wrapped up a relatively non-challenging twenty-minute workout on an exercise bike, nothing out of the ordinary, worked up a good sweat but nothing more than that. I wiped down the bike, grabbed my towel and water bottle and headed back to the locker room. After about ten yards I suddenly felt dizzy, had a fleeting thought that I really ought to sit down – and that was the last I knew until I came to in the back of an ambulance. A voice behind my head saying, “Those guys back there saved your life.”

I had dropped like a rock, in just the right place, at just the right time, with just the right people all around. A cardiac nurse was working out on a nearby machine, saw me go down, and sprang into action, determining that I was non-responsive and without a pulse. The gym manger sprang for the AED, the automatic deliberator hanging on the gym wall. A trainer knelt by my side and began CPR, pounding my chest – I still ache from the bruising. The AED was unrolled, the paddles attached, and the machine, sensing that my heart was out of rhythm, shocked me twice.

And by the grace of God, I came alive again.

We all fear death, at some level or another. In the Bible, this fear is often acknowledged. For instance, when an angel shows up, they invariably begin by saying, “Do not be *afraid*.” In our first reading, psalm 46, the psalmist affirms that God is “our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble. Therefore we will not *fear*.” And in our reading from Isaiah, God tells the people “Do not *fear*, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, you are mine.”

A few weeks ago former President Jimmy Carter, now age 95, fell and broke his pelvis. This is the same man who in April 2015 was diagnosed with melanoma, which had spread to his brain. Two weeks after that fall Carter was in the pulpit at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia, where he said he is “at ease with death”, a state of mind he reached after his diagnosis with that cancer four years ago. He said, “I didn’t ask God to let me live, but I asked God to give me a proper attitude toward death. And I found that I was absolutely and completely at ease with death. It didn’t really matter to me whether I died or lived. Except I was going to miss my family, and miss the work at the Carter Center and miss teaching your Sunday school service sometimes and so forth. All those delightful things.”

What, for Carter, is behind this acceptance of his mortality, of the prospect that sooner or later death will come calling? Said Carter, “I have, since that time, been absolutely confident that my Christian faith includes complete confidence in life after death. So, I am going to live again after I die.”

This is the resurrection faith. This is Easter faith. This is what has been the bedrock belief of Christians going all the way back to Paul the Apostle, who wrote to the church in Corinth:

“Now, let me ask you something profound yet troubling. If you became believers because you trusted the proclamation that Christ is alive, risen from the dead, how can you let people say that there is no such thing as a resurrection? If there’s no resurrection, there’s no living Christ. And face it—if there’s no resurrection for Christ, everything we’ve told you is smoke and mirrors, and everything you’ve staked your life on is smoke and mirrors.” (1 Cor. 15:12-14 The Message)

I know, I know, there are many people of devout faith here today who just don’t believe that there is such a thing as life after death. Who think that this is all just wishful thinking, a fantasy, not possible.

And yet, and yet one might ask, why is it *not* possible? Indeed, if we can imagine such a thing – we humans with our limited intellects – if we can imagine life after death, why is it so hard to believe that God Almighty, the creator of heaven and earth, cannot only imagine it, but can also make it so? If this is our image of God, then maybe our God is just too small, and perhaps we might reconsider.

But then, *why* would God do it? This same God who the psalmist identifies as our refuge and strength, the same God who speaking through the prophet Isaiah says “I have called you by name, you are mine.” Yet we have no problem believing that God is love, that in love God came to us as a little baby in a backwaters town of occupied Israel two thousand years ago, and that embodying that love Jesus sacrificed everything, including his life, for us. If God loves us so much during our life, why would God stop loving us when life is gone?

The question becomes, can anything in all creation separate us from such a love, even death? Again, this time from Paul’s Letter to the Romans:

**“**For I am convinced 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 8:38-9).

And the thing is, we don’t have to just take all this resurrection talk on faith, don’t have to simply take a wait and see approach, don’t have to wait until we are dead and gone. Because the resurrection faith is something which, if we have eyes to see, we can see right here in this life, is something which we can get a taste of, right here and now, and not just in the pie and the sky in the sweet by and by.

I will give you only two examples – I know you all have your own.

The first was from that mission trip we took to New Orleans to help rebuild homes flooded by hurricane Katrina. We were hot – working indoors and without air-conditioning on a warm spring day in New Orleans will do that to you. We were covered with dust – sanding dried plaster overhead for hours on end will do that to you. We had plaster caked on hands and shirts and shorts – being novices at spreading mud, a form of plaster, on wallboard will do that to you. So when a nicely dressed African-American woman pulled up in her car and with a “yoo-hoo y’all” summoned us out of doors, we were happy to take the break.

She was there, she explained to us with a big smile and a twinkle in her eye, to thank us – some 15 members of this church and two other congregations here on the Cape – for coming down to New Orleans and spending a week helping renovate homes devastated by Hurricane Katrina over five years earlier. She told us her name was Elizabeth, and that she worked for the St. Bernard’s Project – the organization for which we were volunteering – as their official hugger. And her job, she told us, was to go to all the volunteer work sites every week, thank all the volunteers, and give them each a big hug.

Of course we asked Elizabeth how the hurricane had affected her – had she evacuated, or had she been there when the levees broke and water often fourteen feet deep had flooded the area? She was fortunate, she told us – had not been in New Orleans at the time, and unlike many people, she had flood insurance, and so was back in a rebuilt home in about 14 months. But then, two years before we arrived, someone broke into her home, and right in front of her eyes killed her 18 year-old daughter, and then shot her in the face.

After she recovered physically, Elizabeth went to St. Bernard’s Project and asked if she could have access to the mental health services they provided for those traumatized by the flood experience. And although her trauma was not directly related to the flooding, they took her in, and eventually she recovered from the almost unimaginable psychic injuries that she had sustained.

And when she had healed, Elizabeth realized that she had a choice. She had every right in the world to be bitter, angry, despairing, full of hatred at a world and a God which could let such terrible things happen; she could have turned away from this cruel world and in on herself. In essence, she could have let death win.

With all that had happened to Elizabeth, who could blame her for choosing to pitch her tent in a Good Friday world. But she chose Easter. She chose to live with the unfathomable mystery of why bad things happen to us, why hurricanes rage and violence invades homes, and she chose to embrace the call she had – the call each of us have – to partner with our Creator is bringing new life to this world.

Elizabeth heard the call to rise to new life, and everything changed; filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth received her mission. And so this is her calling, to take that gratitude that just overflows out of her, and to share it with others, and to go around giving the world hugs every day.

A second example, closer to home. My story, about how I came back to life. No, not this past week, but back when Katie and Julia were 6 and 3, and their mother, and my wife, Sue, was diagnosed with a recurrence of the breast cancer. I remember the following morning as if it were yesterday, walking down to the kitchen in my bathrobe, opening the door to the walk to the driveway to pick up the morning paper, the sun on the grass, the cars going past. And knowing that while everything was the same, now everything had changed, and I felt robbed, robbed of my sense that I could trust life, and wondering if I could ever get that trust back. But that sense of trust in life was an illusion, wasn’t it, because life is, ultimately, not trustworthy. People we trust will disappoint us; at times our hopes will come to nothing; those we love will die; *we* will die. Sue would go on to die.

And yet, while in a very real way I died that morning, I came back to life. I cannot point out any one thing that made the difference – it all made a difference. The love of our daughters, the support of our church family, the help of our extended family, and a faith that allowed me room to rage and question and doubt and finally just listen, and so hear that voice in the night reassuring me that I was not and would never be alone. I came back to life, not through an AED, but through a divine love made incarnate in community and through a connection which just could not be broken.

Friends, as Kenny Chesney sings, “Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to go now.” And yet we can choose how we live, and we do not have to be afraid, for we have a God – attested to in Holy Scripture, made known to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, revealed in the lives of those we know, like Jimmy Carter, like Elizabeth in New Orleans – who loves us too much to let anything come between us, in this life or the next.

May this song, then, be our song, these words, our anthem: “No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that rock I’m clinging; since love is lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?”

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