Even at the Grave We Make Our Song

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I pray to you, my God,
and call you by your name,
but cannot lay hold of you
because you are greater than a name
and smaller than a word,
more silent than all the silence in the world.
Make me receptive to you,
give me a living heart
and new eyes
to see you, hidden and invisible,
to take you as you are
when you come without power,
and, in my weakness, in my death,
to know who you are. [1]

These reflections address the most commonplace, ordinary, and universal of facts, the fact of death. I write as a Christian. I write as an Episcopal priest, someone who, among other things, has been entrusted with blessing the dying, burying the dead, comforting the bereaved, and celebrating the sacraments that connect and nourish us with God's own life. I write as a person who is dying, like everyone else, and as someone whose life has already been intimately touched, and torn, and in some ways healed, by death. Of all the deaths in my life that I have witnessed or been close to, the death that has affected me most deeply was the death two years ago of my newborn daughter. Rebecca was perfect in every way, but she was born several months too soon. After watching her struggle for four hours, my husband and I, in consultation with her doctor, decided to stop radical medical intervention and to let her go in peace. She died quietly in our arms. Through the mercy of God, Rebecca has been my spiritual teacher ever since. She has taught me more about death and the life beyond than any books or any doctrine, and it is to her that I dedicate these reflections.

Death is an enormous subject, one that can be best addressed from our own experience. We each bear our own particular memories and associations around this topic, our own particular

fears and hopes. Perhaps someone dear to you has died. Perhaps you anticipate the death of someone you love. Perhaps you already recognize the approach of death within your own body. Like all adult human beings, you surely have wondered about the meaning and the mystery of death.

Sociologists often comment that religion may be the universal human response to the problem of death. A contemporary scholar has stated that every religion he knows anything at all about, "from the animistic and tribal religions of the Native Americans or Japanese Shinto, to the so-called 'salvational' religions of Christianity, Hinduism, . . . Islam [and Buddhism], has much to say concerning death. However, while the former religions respond in some way to the problem as part of a broader concern for such things as a plentiful food supply, mating, ritual purity, tribal unity, and harmony with natural forces, the salvational religions, by virtue of their special concern for salvation itself, seem… to be fundamentally and primarily responses to the fact of death."[2]

Throughout history, reflective people, both religious and irreligious, have wondered about the meaning of death, and about the possibility of some form of afterlife. Our attempts to formulate and to communicate our beliefs are not always especially convincing. A few years ago The Boston Globe reported the story of a boy whose cat had died and whose mother had carefully explained that God had taken the cat to heaven. The following day the puzzled boy returned to his mother and asked her, "What would God want with a dead cat?"

For better or worse, human beings have come up with basically four ideas of what happens to us after we die.[3] First, "nothing happens to me after I die because death is the end of me. I may live on in other people's memories, or perhaps my influence will continue for a time, but as a conscious, acting individual, I do not survive my death." This is the "death ends all" idea, equating death with personal extinction. It is the idea which materialists affirm, and in which the Sadducees believed during the time of Jesus.

The second idea is that "after my death my body disintegrates permanently, but my immaterial essence (my mind, or soul, or *jiva*) is reborn in another body (animal or human) here on earth, perhaps to be reborn again many (or even an infinite number of) times." This is the "reincarnation" idea of certain schools of Buddhism and Hinduism.

The third idea is that "after death my body disintegrates, but my immaterial essence lives on forever in an immaterial world." This is the "immortality of the soul" idea that was developed in Greek philosophy and adopted by the Essenes at the time of Jesus.

Fourth, and finally, there is the option that "after death my body disintegrates, but at some point in the future, God will miraculously raise it from the ground and reconstitute me as a person." This is the "resurrection" idea. Jesus believed in the resurrection of the dead, as did the Pharisees in his time; it is the idea, though understood in various ways, which Christian faith embraces. These four ideas are not all mutually exclusive. Many Christian and Islamic scholars affirm ideas three and four.

There is a wide range of Christian belief concerning death and the afterlife, and I will not delineate it here. Instead, I focus on three symbols, three images which are foundational to Christianity--the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus Christ--and I explore how these symbols came to life for me as I prayed over my daughter's death. In different ways the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension of Christ speak to the fear of death that lurks within every one of us. In different ways they reveal to us the abiding presence of a Love that death cannot destroy. And in different ways they can prepare us for death and awaken us right now to the eternal

life that is even now being born among us.

Crucifixion

From the beginning, the symbol of the Christian faith has been the cross. This was not a comfortable or an easy symbol for the first Christians: the cross was a base instrument of execution, reserved for the lowest criminals. The first disciples were at first acutely embarrassed, even shamed, by the cross; they were "hard put to give a satisfactory account of why this Jesus whom they proclaimed as Messiah was executed so shamefully as a public criminal, and how his resurrection which they could substantiate only on the basis of personal testimony could be reconciled with his dishonorable death which was a matter of public record."[4]

Later Christians were chagrined not so much by the humiliating circumstances of Jesus' death, as by the fact that the Son of God suffered at all. Greek influences were strong in the early Church, and Hellenistic philosophy conceived of God as entirely transcendent: the impassive, Unmoved Mover living in a realm beyond and invulnerable to suffering, disintegration, and decay. The first heresy to arise in the early church was Docetism--the belief that because Jesus was truly divine, truly the Son of God, he only *appeared* to be human and only *seemed* to suffer as he agonized upon the cross.

Docetism was finally denounced as a heresy, and Christians agreed on the true meaning of the crucifixion. Here, in the suffering and death of Christ upon the cross, we meet a God who does not flinch from the human condition, a God who pours out the divine self and becomes human, a God who enters fully into the depths of human degradation, terror, and death. What the early Church found scandalous and shocking in the cross is exactly what gives hope to those who fear death. Do we fear dying alone, or dying in pain, or dying in some humiliating fashion? Jesus suffered this before us. Scripture records that Jesus agonized before death, that he was "distressed and agitated" (Mk 14:33, NRSV). He cried out to God that the terror of death not touch him, praying "Remove this cup from me" (Mk 14:36). Again according to Scripture, he confronted death with "great cries and tears" (Heb 5:7), and uttered upon the cross the cry of utter abandonment and loss, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46) Jesus died deserted by almost all his friends, and under conditions of great pain and humiliation.

The crucifixion tells us that there is nothing we can experience that Jesus has not experienced before us. Jesus did not steel himself against pain or loss or grief. He did not stand coolly distant from it, judging it or criticizing it, an impassive God above and outside of human sadness and suffering. The God who enters into our suffering knows that new life begins only when we are willing to feel pain, willing to grieve, to protest, to open our hearts to the pain of being alive. To feel our pain is to move out of numbness and inertia, out of the denial that insists and pretends that all is well when in fact it is not.

If the crucifixion means anything at all, it means at least this: first, that God has entered not only into human life, but also into death, and that even in the utter helplessness and loneliness of our death, God's love and presence will be with us. And second, the crucifixion means that, because this loving presence is with us even unto death, we can dare right now to feel our own protest in the face of suffering and death, our own fear, our own pain. Jesus has been there before and he accompanies us now. As we open to our grief and anger and fear, as Jesus did before us, through the grace of God we will begin to receive new life.

The crucifixion is an invitation to face our own grief, our own losses. But the powers-that-be in this

world do not want us to grieve, to protest, to feel outrage and sorrow when we face the actions of this society that bring death to body or spirit: the racism, the violence, the abuse of the helpless, the poisoning of air and water. The powers-that-be would rather keep us numb, zombies too busy, too bored, or too protected to feel the pain that allows something new to be imagined, something new to be born.

Christians cling to the cross of Christ, not because they like to suffer--nobody other things being equal, would *prefer* to suffer! No, we cling to the cross of Christ because in it we know that nothing, not even suffering, not even death, can separate us from the love of God.

My own little sharing in the crucifixion came two years ago in the pain of watching Rebecca die. My husband and I had time to meet her, to hold her, and to say goodbye. I have never known a grief that went as deep as this one. There is something in me and in every parent [that] is passionate about a baby. We long, fiercely, to protect and to nurture our children, to keep them safe, to find out who they are and what delights them, to share in their pleasures and to shield them from pain. At the death of a long-awaited infant, it is natural to cry out in protest and grief. And for some of us--certainly for me--there is the shock of realizing that, yes, suffering is real, death is real, loss is real. For once, all our conscious and unconscious efforts to pretend otherwise suddenly become both foolish and futile.

One of the gifts we receive in suffering a great loss is the understanding that we are not alone: loss is universal. Every loss is personal and particular, but loss comes in some form to everyone. I cannot tell you how many women (some of them women I have known for years) have, since the death of Rebecca, told me the story of their own losses in conceiving or bearing a child. Whether or not we have experienced this particular kind of grief, at some time or other in our lives we all face some especially painful loss, perhaps the loss of a parent, a spouse, a sibling, a love; perhaps the loss of an identity, or the loss of hope. Loss is written all over the daily papers, in the jobs and homes and dreams lost to the recession, in the people lost to hunger, to drugs, and to the devastation of war.

To all of us who can no longer deny the reality of loss, to all who find themselves missing or grieving or searching for something precious that has slipped away, the gospel of Christ speaks with power and hope. The God we know in Christ is a God who loves the lost, a God who eagerly seeks out and joyfully gathers in everyone among us, and everything within us, that is outcast or brokenhearted or lost. Ours is a seeking God, a passionate God, a God who loves and loses, who feels the pang of loss like a shepherd who has lost a sheep, like an impoverished woman who has lost a valuable coin. God yearns and seeks, just as we do when we have lost something deeply precious to us. God is vulnerable to loss, just as we are. When we grieve, when we yearn, when we seek something beloved that we have lost, we share in God's longing, we enterfor a time into the great stream of ardent love that moves at the heart of the universe.

For many of us, for me, it is in feeling the loss of someone or something we dearly love that we find God. When we grieve a great loss, we find that God is weeping beside us. We may be just as sad and angry as we were before, but now our sadness and anger have been touched by God. They are a window to God. They have opened a way for us to see and to share in the holy vulnerability of God, which was made visible once and for all in the Word made flesh. There is a deep healing that comes when our hearts are blown open and we let our grief join God's grief. There is still the sadness and the loss. It is still true that Rebecca has died. And yet, for all of us, our loss is also God's loss; our grief is God's grief. In that loving communion with God we find comfort and peace, even in the midst of our pain.

This, for me, is a fundamental message of the crucifixion. In our willingness to face loss, in our willingness to open to grief, in our willingness to let our hearts be broken, we connect with the passion-

ate love of God, commune with God, and touch the depths of what is most true. There is a love within us and among us and around us which nothing, not even death, can destroy.

I confess that I still do not like loss. I do not prefer it. I would not choose it. But I do know we cannot avoid it. And I know that, even in the heart of loss, God is present. Jesus suffered upon the cross, and in that suffering he accomplished the healing that draws us to new life. When we Christians gather for the Eucharist to celebrate our communion with God in Christ, we share with one another the broken bread, the wine poured out, the broken and given flesh of God. In this sacrament we share our vulnerability with God's vulnerability, and we open ourselves to be found by the One who loves us, suffers with us, and seeks us in and through all things.

The cross of Christ asks us this: What are the tears that we need to shed, what is the grief or the anger or the secret that we need to express, before we, too, can be open to new life? Are we willing to let our anger, our mourning, our secrets, become a place of encounter with God?

Resurrection

A second central symbol of Christianity is the resurrection of Christ. Belief in the resurrection originally emerged within Judaism as "an expectation of the physical reanimation of the. . .faithful who lay buried in tombs and graves."[5] This understanding of the resurrection continued well into the Christian era, but it is propounded today only by very theologically conservative Christians. Resurrection is understood by other Christians in more spiritualized terms, as a renewed life in which both body and soul experience a new creation. The self continues to exist, but in a radically new way. After resurrection the self is wholly transformed. The self is "bodily," but in a mind-blowing sense--what Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians calls an "imperishable," "glorious," "powerful," "spiritual" body (1 Co 15:42-44).[6]

However the resurrection is conceived, it is "the divine act of new creation", one which is essentially "unobservable and indescribable." What the Scriptures narrate is not so much what happened exactly in the resurrection of Christ, as "the outcome of its having taken place." The core of resurrection faith is this: "already within the temporal order of existence, a new beginning of life from God" and in God is now possible.[7] In countless ways, the New Testament meditates upon one fact: The miracle has taken place. Through the grace of God in Christ, death has been overcome.

Americans generally don't put much stock in miracles. We are a pragmatic, practical, down-to-earth lot, on the whole. Give us cold, hard facts, something we can measure and predict and control. Scientific proof is what we prefer: objective evidence, the laws of nature, reason and logic, a universe whose workings can be grasped by the human mind.

Miracles violate scientific proof, flying in the face of the laws of nature. They make light of reason and logic, and they blow open the constructions of the mind. Not surprisingly, even supposedly faithful Christians sometimes prefer not to believe in miracles. Maybe we come to church on Easter. Maybe we even come to church every Sunday of the year. But secretly something in us may whisper: Now don't go too far with this stuff. Miracles are not really real. Jesus didn't really rise from the dead. Obviously that is impossible. There's got to be a logical explanation. Maybe some disciples came in secret and stole the body so that they could point to the empty tomb and claim that Jesus had risen from the dead. Or maybe Jesus was only in a coma when he was taken down from the cross, and eventually recovered. Or maybe the story of the resurrection is just that: a story, a metaphor, a legend, purely symbolic, nothing more.

The miracles that we usually like best are the ones that are nice and small and safe. They make life more pleasant and they don't give anyone any trouble. We water our plants with Miracle-Gro. We mix our tuna fish with MiracleWhip. We listen to ads touting the latest "miracle" in computer software or laundry detergent or hair replacement. The only miracles that are real, whispers the doubter within us, are the ones you can buy in your local store. Miracles are trivial things, consumer items, commodities. Buy one, buy several. Stock your shelves. Either miracles are not real, we tell ourselves, or if they are real, they are not very important; they do not matter very much.

Into the midst of this world of skepticism and doubt explodes the miracle of the first Easter: an earthquake--an angel bright as lightning, who rolls away the stone--an empty tomb--two women overcome with terror and joy--the discovery that Jesus is alive. This is no petty miracle, another odd story from the local tabloid, something to gape at and then throw away. This is a miracle that makes a difference, a miracle which the powers that rule this world tried in vain to prevent, and which they try to this day to conceal or deny.

Matthew's account of the Resurrection begins and ends by describing how Pilate and the religious authorities try to keep the miracle at bay: to stop it from happening in the first place and, when it happens anyway, to hide it. A squad of Roman soldiers seals up the tomb and stands guard before it. As Pilate has ordered them, they make the tomb as secure as they can. But human efforts to prevent the Resurrection are impossible. God's life, God's power burst forth. In a wonderful touch of irony, the guards who are there to guarantee the finality of Christ's death, become themselves, in Matthew's words, "like dead men" (Mt 28:4) in their terror of the new life from the tomb. The miracle has taken place. Nothing can stop it. The religious and civic authorities are shocked, and, as Matthew tells it, they rush to set up an elaborate scheme of bribes and lies to conceal the news as best they can. It comes as no surprise that Jesus' enemies do everything in their power to destroy him and his works, including, above all, the fact of his resurrection. The resurrection is a miracle that makes a difference.

If Christ is alive, then there has been unleashed into our world a power which is greater than death, a source of love and energy and hope that nothing and no one can destroy. If Christ is alive, then there is no suffering we can endure, no anguish we can bear, no loss or disappointment we can undergo, that Christ himself does not suffer with us. If Christ is alive, then we are, each one of us, beloved and cherished by God, and drawn irresistibly to create new forms of community that overturn the systems of rank and privilege and domination that divide us and set us one against another. If Christ is alive, then there is no need to settle for a life undermined and overshadowed by the nagging fear of death. If Christ is alive, then eternal life begins, not at the end of time nor even at the funeral home, but right now. If Christ is alive, then eternal life exists on both sides of the grave, and we are invited to enter more deeply into the life and light and power of God right now. If Christ is alive, then we are free to be our largest, truest selves: a people free to be vulnerable, free to be generous, free to fall in love with life. If Christ is alive, then there is nothing more real than love, nothing more true than love, nothing more enduring than love.

The resurrection is a miracle that makes a difference, but not a miracle that ignores or downplays the reality of suffering or the fact of death. The first Easter did not come in soft pastel tones, shrink-wrapped in plastic. Jesus despaired and groaned and bled upon the Cross. His suffering was real, and his death was real. Christian faith has nothing to do with wishful thinking, with gazing off fondly into space and imagining away the suffering and brutalities of this world. On the contrary, Christian faith looks squarely into suffering and brutality and discovers even here, even in the center of our anguish and confusion, a love that weeps with us and grieves with us and comforts us and empowers us, a love

that is infinite and that will not let us go. If Christ is alive, then we need not fear the darkness, for we dare to trust that, through it and beyond it and even within it, we are being drawn to the light.

We all have our doubts about miracles, about whether or not they are real, and whether or not they matter. What actually happened on that first Easter no one really knows. God is not afraid of our honest doubts, and we should feel free to pray our doubts honestly. It is good to question, to test, to explore for ourselves what this miracle might mean. Our minds are dim, at best, and the ways of God are a mystery. No wonder that our intellects balk and our words stumble when we try to explain the resurrection!

But I am convinced that Jesus' rising from the dead is one miracle that cannot be assessed and evaluated and understood from the outside. We can only know the reality and power of the resurrection if we dare to step inside it and to make Jesus' story our own. The resurrection is not just something that happened once, two thousand years ago. Nor is the resurrection something that happened only to Jesus. Through that first resurrection, Christ has been raised, and we have been raised. Eternal life is a present reality, not just a future possibility.

Do most of us Christians realize this most of the time? Hardly! And that is where the Christian journey begins. From day to day, from Sunday to Sunday, from year to year we seek to make more and more real in our own lives the fullness of our union with Christ. We may not understand what happened at the resurrection, but we do know that through that event a great energy was released into the world. We feel its power already at work within us.

It springs to new life whenever we gather around the altar to break bread in Jesus' name. It springs to new life whenever we act with compassion, whenever we seek justice, whenever we dare to open ourselves lovingly to the reality of our life, just as it is--the pain and the joy alike. It is not enough just to gaze upon the resurrection from afar. This is not only Jesus' miracle, this is our miracle, too, a miracle that we are invited to make more and more real every day of our lives, a miracle that we will know in full when we pass at last through the weakness and helplessness of our own death. If Christ's crucifixion gives us the courage to mourn, his resurrection gives us the courage to hope.

Ascension

The last of the three symbols of Christianity that I want to discuss is the ascension of Christ. The New Testament's only detailed account of how Jesus departed from his disciples and returned to God is found in the Acts of the Apostles. As Acts tells the story, having appeared on different occasions to his disciples for forty days after his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus gathered his disciples together, promised them the gift of the Holy Spirit, and was then "taken up" or "lifted up" in a cloud. Jesus disappeared from their sight, and the disciples returned to Jerusalem to gather in prayer with the women and men who had known and loved him.

What do we make of this story, and of the cryptic phrase that many Christians repeat every Sunday in the creed, "he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father"? Does this affirmation hold any juice, any energy, for us? What does the ascension reveal to us about who Christ is and who we are? Does it speak to our fear of death and to our hope for new life?

For me, the answers to these questions are coming neither from my theological training nor from intellectual analysis, but from my daughter, Rebecca. Several months after Rebecca's death, I realized that I needed some fairly extended time for prayer. I packed up my suitcase and went off for a few days to a retreat house on Boston's North Shore.

And so, one cold winter morning, I found myself in the retreat-house dining hall with a cup of coffee, looking out over the waves. I was aware of being intensely angry. I wanted Rebecca back. I felt

as fierce as a mother bear who has lost her cub. Everything in me protested the death of my little one. I did not want to cling to my anger, to let my heart become bitter and shriveled and hard, but at the same time I did not want to ignore my anger, or despise it, because I love Rebecca, and I knew that my passionate anger and grief at her death was an expression of love.

So I sat there, weeping into my coffee, looking out at the ocean, and wondering how this terrible loss could possibly draw me deeper into the heart of God. For a long time I watched the waves rise and crest and fall, rise and crest and fall, and it occurred to me that life and death are as inevitable as waves. Life and death come and go. We are like waves in an ocean; we are here for a time and then we pass away. I do not believe that when we die we just blur back into some kind of oceanic oneness, for God is concerned about every sparrow, and numbers the hairs on our heads, and cares about each one of us in particular, in death as in life. Every soul is unique. Yet death is as inevitable as a wave that crests and falls and disappears. And the question for me, for all of us, is how do we keep our hearts open when death and impermanence are so much with us? How do we continue to open to love, how do we continue to live in love, when we are ravaged by the anger and grief that arise within us in the face of death?

As I sat and watched the waves come and go, I saw before me three choices. I could choose to love my one "wave" only. I could cling fiercely to my little Rebecca and refuse to let her go. I could let my heart grow bitter and hard because she had passed away and was gone, as evanescent as a wave. A second possibility would be to walk away entirely from such passionate love, and, instead, to gaze coolly on the ocean as a whole. I could be detached, indifferent. I could watch things come and go and refuse to love any waves in particular.

Or--and this is the insight that broke open my heart--I could love all the waves with the love that I had known in that one wave. I could let Rebecca be a doorway to perceiving the preciousness of every person. What if my fervent love for this tiny child was a glimpse into the love that God holds for each one of us? What if she were the doorway, the "narrow gate," through which I must pass in order to enter the all-embracing, universal compassion of God? As Rebecca withdrew from my sight and returned to God, she was taking a part of me with her. What would happen if I let my love for her draw me like a magnet, like a stream that flows irresistibly into the living ocean of God?

I wonder if this is something of what the disciples experienced during the ascension of Christ. The disciples had loved Jesus passionately. For a while his death was for them an occasion of deep confusion, anger, guilt, and sorrow. But it seems to me that, in the last of his resurrection appearances, when Jesus "ascended into heaven" and disappeared from their sight, the disciples began to perceive that the love which they bore for Jesus, and the grief which they felt at his absence, was a doorway, a gateway to the infinite love of God that embraces all beings and all things.

Because Jesus died, a larger love was released into the world. As Jesus once explained to his bewildered disciples, "It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Spirit will not come to you; but if I go, I will send the Spirit to you" (Jn 16:7). Because the disciples grieved and prayed and admitted that they had to let Jesus go, they were prepared, on the day of Pentecost, to receive the Spirit of truth that the world can never grasp. They were prepared for a new love and power to burst upon them, a love which embraces all peoples, in all places, so that our joy may be complete.

Because Jesus died, a larger love was released into the world. And is that not true in our own experience? Is it not true that when some people die they leave more love behind? That is my experience of loving and losing Rebecca. Because she lived and died, more love has been released into my heart and into this world. By allowing myself to grieve her loss, to rage, to weep, to refuse any premature con-

solation, I have glimpsed the truth that each one of us is as precious in God's eyes as my little daughter was and is to me. Love has come upon me, in a way that I had never known before.

To put this in more theological terms, what the ascension expresses is that from now on, the life of Jesus Christ "can never again be identified with merely one spot, one moment in history." Christ is universal. Through the resurrection and ascension, Christ enjoys a freedom of being that his human embodiment did not permit. "The gateway of death opened into a new and free life for him, the opportunity for fellowship with all people, in all places, in all times." What is more, "the death of Jesus did not cut him off from the world of matter." The ascension means not that Jesus became "'acosmic,' cut off from the universe, but [rather] 'all-cosmic,' permeating all matter and reality." Christ through his death, resurrection, and ascension now relates intimately to all things and gives new holiness and significance to the world of which we are a part. All of creation is now infused with his life, and permeated with his love. By "ascending into heaven," to use the traditional imagery--or, to change the image, by descending into the very heart of being with God himself--Christ is now intimately related with all that is. Christ is everywhere, in everyone and everything, "undergirding all that is. . .[and] ever seeking to bring about God's intended unity of the universe."[8]

Thanks to the ascension, all our little loves can draw us straight into the large love of God. Thanks to the ascension, everything that is human--all our cares and concerns, our needs and our loves--have been taken up with Jesus to be drawn into the life of God. As Rebecca teaches me over and over again, the passionate love we feel for those we love and those we lose can lead us straight to God, straight to a love which is larger than anything we can ask or imagine. Like the disciples waiting patiently for the coming of the Spirit, we may not know when that love will come upon us. We may not know what form that love will take. We may not know how it will express itself within our lives. But what we do know is that the ascension reveals Christ's presence in all creation and the power of a Love from which nothing can separate us, not loss, not grief, not even death itself.

And finally, thanks to the Ascension, "those who die in Christ are not removed from this world to a never-never land of the spirit. On the contrary, in Christ they are more closely related to the whole of the world in a new and ever-enlarging way. In our communion with Christ, then, there is also the possibility for communion with everyone who is in him."[9]

In my experience, what Christians call "the communion of the saints" is not a verbal or intellectual experience or something that can be manufactured by our own efforts. The experience of communion with those who have died tends--for me, anyway--to come unexpectedly, in surprising, delightful, strengthening ways.[10] Soon after the death of his son in World War II, a Belgian father wrote: "Pieter is with me today, not because I remember him or because his ghost chooses to visit me, but because we are bound together by the love we share. His presence is not a mirage, but a real thing, most vivid and often unexpected. He appears to me as he was because, no doubt, I should not be able to recognize him if he appeared otherwise."[11] That has been my experience with Rebecca. I can only pray that the gift of death will open my eyes to see her as she truly is and that together we will give thanks to the One who gave us both life.

If the crucifixion gives us the courage to grieve, and the resurrection offers us the courage to hope, the ascension gifts us with the power to love. The purpose of life is to grow in love, to grow into the divine Love that embraces those who are far off and those who are near, those who are like us and those who are not, those who are living and those who have died.

Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, in words that are often chosen for Christian burial services: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or

nakedness, or peril, or sword?. . .No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 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" (Rm 8:35, 37-39).

As the old Shaker hymn puts it, "When love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can we keep from singing?" As the Eastern Byzantine prayer, now used in Episcopal burial services, expresses the mystery, "All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia." Or as Fred Astaire would sing the old Irving Berlin number of the 1930's in his wonderfully tuneless voice, "Let's face the music and dance."

Notes

1. Huub Oosterhuis, ***Your Word is Near: Contemporary Christian Prayers***, trans. N.D. Smith (New York: Paulist Press, 1968), p. 114.

2. Francis H. Cook, "Memento Mori: The Buddhist Thinks about Death" in Stephen T. Davis, ed., ***Death and Afterlife*** (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), p. 155.

3. Stephen T. Davis, "Introduction," in ***Death and Afterlife***, p. ix.

4. Carolyn Osiek, ***RSCJ. Beyond Anger: On Being a Feminist in the Church*** (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), p. 66.

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Published in **Review for Religious***, Vol. 53, No. 3, May/June 1993, 1994, pp. 420-435*