



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

March 29, 2009

Lent 5B

By Reverend Donna Barr

It was two weeks ago while traveling to Connecticut, that I crossed over the West Virginia Mountains to experienced a blinding blizzard. When I arrived back in Kentucky, only one week later, to my surprise, I witnessed the first taste of spring. I had been monitoring the progress of the daffodils and only in a few days I was delighted to see not only green stalks shooting forth from the ground, but also tiny yellow flowers. The temperatures have now risen into the sixties, the birds have been heard singing, crystal blue skies have been observed and the first shoots of flowers have appeared springing forth from the still cold and seemingly lifeless ground. The dark days of winter seem to be coming to an end. Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you, unless the grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit." As we experience the annual dawn of spring, the dawn of new life and growth in our created world, we appreciate these words of Jesus. We know that every year as the weather turns colder and the vibrant leaves drop from their trees, the earth must lie fallow, must give way to decay and desolation and death in anticipation of its glorious rebirth in the springtime. This makes sense to us. This we can grasp. What is hard for us to do is to translate what happens naturally in our created world with what Jesus tells us must also happen to us mortal beings.

"Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also." It is only in dying, in falling to the dank, dark, and desolate ground like a tiny seed, that we are born to new life – to eternal life. Whoever serves Jesus must follow him all the way to the cross. There is no other way around it. And yet ever since the days of our ancestors, Adam and Eve, ever since they ate the apple and hid from their God, we mortals have been doing our best to find a way around death.

In *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*, The Rev. Peter Gomes, professor and chaplain at Harvard University, writes about an experience with some of his students as they come to terms with the tragic, sudden death of a classmate. "Here they were, black-suited, still fair of face, and looking younger and indeed more vulnerable than when last we had all been together. Death had intruded, and with it a monstrous assault on the human claim to immortality. They wept and raged at the loss of their friend. Death was an abstraction about which movies were made, and death happened to grandparents, to the occasional victim of a terrible crime, or to participants in war. Death in theory would come to them eventually, but so far down the road of reality that it was hardly real at all. How do the worldly-wise, the hip, the interpreters of life in the fast lane deal with it? How do they deal with the irrational judgments of death unprepared, unexpected, unwelcome?"

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Death is not something any of us want to understand or to know; death is somehow unfair, and in this country it is culturally unconstitutional, violating our right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Thus, when death intrudes, particularly among the young, we respond in terror, anger and fear. As I listened to the heartrending eulogies of my students for their classmate I heard anger and fear. I heard their pained, pathetic desire to make sense of it all. . . I reminded these young people that while funeral-going was perhaps a new experience for most of them, it was an all too familiar habit for the rest of us. I reminded them that the context of life is not living, but death, and that it is out of death that life comes."

The great spiritual paradox we face as Christians is that we all, not just the young among us, live in a death defying culture. We all buy into the illusion that we can in our own power fend off death while at the same time we put our faith in a God who met death head on, and who teaches us that only by encountering death can we experience real life.

As we draw ever closer to Holy Week, the most important week of the year for us Christians, we are confronted again with the truth that "the context of life is not living, but death, and it is out of death that life comes. "As we follow Jesus to his death on the cross, we come to recognize, as much as it does not make sense to us, that our finiteness, our vulnerability, our weakness and darkness become the places where immortality is to be found. As we stand with Jesus at the foot of the cross, at the gate of his death and ours, we recognize that it also becomes the gate of life. And like the grain of wheat, falling into the desolate, dank and fallow ground becomes a way that leads to transformation.

Ann Lamott, bestselling author and writer on faith, speaks of her astonishment at this transformation, "Then, amazingly, the very first bulbs began to bloom. Within a week, there were dozens of daffodils in the yard. When this finally happens in late winter every year, I'm astonished. I've always given up. In November and December when I plant them, I get swept up in the fantasy that the earth, after so much rain, will be rich and loamy. Planting bulbs sounds like a romantic and fun thing to do, but it never is. The earth is rocky and full of roots; it's clay, and it seems doomed and polluted, yet you dig little holes for the ugly, shriveled bulbs, throw in a handful of poppy seeds, and cover everything over, and you know you'll never see them-its death and clay and shrivel. Your hands are nicked from the rocks, your nails are black with soil... Yet here we are in the last days of March, with daffodils everywhere, and poppies waiting in the wings." Here we are, marveling at the green stalks and yellow flowers poking out of the desolate and lifeless ground -the first signs of spring for us in Kentucky. Here we are - another Holy Week – just around the corner, still struggling to make sense of it all, not sure what to believe about death and life, and yet we are compelled to follow Jesus as he makes his way to the cross. And as we always are with those hearty daffodils, our first signs of spring we are delightfully surprised and even a little astonished, to stand at the foot of the cross and

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come to find that it is indeed the gate of life. For just a little ways beyond it to our great amazement we see the empty tomb.

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