

TMY SERMON – COS
May 12, 2019
Fourth Sunday of Easter
Acts 9:36-43; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30; Psalm 23

To me, the world divides into two camps: those who use euphemisms and cutesy-poo phrases to refer to death and those who don't. And I think that statement just revealed that I am in the latter camp. I realized it's probably the minority view when I started looking for all the different ways there are to say that someone has died without actually saying the words "dead" or "death" or "died." There are lots and lots of them.

He bought the farm. She bit the dust. We lost him. She's at rest. He went the way of all flesh.

Of course, it's easy to understand why so many of us use those euphemisms. It's a way to hold off the feelings of sadness, loss and fear that come with thoughts of death. We need ways to help ourselves soften death, to ease its sting, to help us forget its permanence.

For those of us who have lost a spouse or close relative or friend, we know that heart-aching, sinking feeling when we think, "I need to remember to tell her .. oh"

Or the hardness in your chest and the lump in your throat and the sting in your eyes when you think to yourself, "I wonder what he'll say when he finds out ... oh."

All those euphemisms help us soften the realization that the dear person we want so much to interact with is beyond our reach, and we have no clarity or certainty about when, if ever, we will be in the same reality with that person ever again.

She's crossed the Jordan. He kicked the bucket. She passed away. He's in a better place.

If we ever doubted that our reactions to death are universal and timeless, we only have to look at today's reading from Acts. When Tabitha dies, her friends alternate between weeping and showing Peter all the wonderful handiwork she had created as part of her good works and acts of charity.

And isn't that exactly what we did at the two most recent funerals we held here at COS? When we memorialized Paula Smith, the altar was filled with her needlework, and many of us wore pins like this, which she had made. Perfect examples of her careful, whimsical, colorful artistry.

And when we had a funeral service for Patrick Burnett, we did the same thing. We called up and presented his good works and acts of charity: his quiet, dry wit; the way he leaned in to provide wonderfully generous hospitality and dignity to the guests he served in our soup kitchen.

Just as Tabitha's friends did, we gathered as a community and we alternated between weeping and urging each other to take note of the good works and acts of charity that characterized Paula and Patrick.

And oh, what rejoicing there would have been if a person like Peter could have arrived and said, "Paula, get up." "Patrick, get up." And they had. If Paula and Patrick had been shown to us to be alive right in the midst of those grieving moments, what rejoicing there would have been in our whole community, whether we were saints or widows or just plain old COSers. But that didn't happen.

He gave up the ghost. She's gone to sleep with Jesus. He was called home. She met her maker.

My husband, John, has shared with me a bit about the history of the early church. Back then, baptism happened once a year, during the Easter Vigil. While the community of the baptized gathered in the main church for the vigil, the baptismal candidates went to an adjacent baptistry with the bishop and were baptized. Once that happened, the bishop took them to the church and rapped on the church doors with his staff. The vigil stopped and when the doors were opened, the bishop said to the whole community, "Come and greet the risen Christ in his newly baptized."

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John has drawn a link from this ritual to the concept that Christ died an individual and he rose a community. A community ... like ours, like us. We see the risen Christ in one another, we embody his spirit and his power.

So we don't need a Peter to help us overcome the deaths of those we hold dear, to help us bring back our Tabithas. We can do it ourselves, as a community, however imperfectly, whenever we call them back and recall them, when we remember them. When we re-member, reassemble them.

If we want to say, "Paula, get up" we just need to go and work in the atriums downstairs, where we can use all the beautiful, fanciful materials she created for us and for our children. Or work with the altar guild to maintain and use the wonderful, colorful vestments and materials she left us. And then we need to tell each other about that experience.

If we want to say, "Patrick, get up" we can volunteer at a Saturday lunch, make a quietly wry comment and then engage in his brand of extravagant hospitality with as many guests as possible. And then we need to share that with each other.

She fell off her perch. He breathed his last. She's in Abraham's bosom. He took the last train to Glory.

We don't need all those words and phrases to mollify our anxiety about death, to soften death, to force it to release its grip on our hearts. We don't even need all those words and phrases to bring back at least some of the things that death has taken from us.

We only need two words.

We only need each other.