

“Eternal”

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A Retelling of the Easter Story

How early it is! The sky is changing from deep darkness to the faded blue-gray of morning light. Now is her time to go – in the dimness of early morning, before the others awake – just to be there, near his tomb, one more time. She runs to the place and stops. The stone is rolled away! How can this be? This stone took several workmen to put in place. It was guarded. But now no one is there. Frightened, she runs to tell Peter and the others: “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him.”

Peter and John run to the tomb. John gets there first. He looks in, but doesn’t see the body. Peter enters. No, the body is not there. The linen wrappings and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head are there, but not together. The head cloth is rolled up in a place by itself. John enters the tomb. What has happened? He is overwhelmed. The men leave, going back to their place of hiding.

But Mary stays, stunned and fearful. As she weeps, she bends over and looks in the tomb. She sees two angels in white, one at the place where Jesus’ head would have laid, the other where his feet would have been. They ask, “Woman, why are you weeping?”

“They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Mary turns around and sees someone she supposes to be the gardener. She does not know it is Jesus. “Why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?”

Through her tears, Mary begs him to tell her where the body has been moved. “If you tell me where he’s been taken, I will go and take him away.” And then she hears it, the word that would ring in her heart and mind for the rest of her life, “Mary!” he says. “Mary!” And in an instant, she knows him.

“Teacher!” She falls to her knees and reaches out to embrace him. “Don’t hold on to me. I have not yet ascended to God. But go to the others and say to them, ‘I am ascending – to my God and your God.’” Now with tears of joy, Mary runs from the garden and to the disciples, announcing, “I have seen the Lord!” And she tells them what Jesus had said to her.

“Wow... wow...” Neither Wanda nor I had seen the Grand Canyon before and when our exchange semester at NMSU was ended we decided to do a whirlwind tour before I hopped on a Greyhound bus to Pennsylvania and she drove home to Fargo. “Wow...” I’ve been to the Grand Canyon a dozen times since then, and found it breathtaking each time, but in the first moments of that first visit, it was Wanda’s response as she stood there on the south rim that most caught my attention.

From the beginning, God has striven to impress upon us a key insight – life matters. Or rather living matters. Sometimes we get it, like when Jesus is sharing parties and picnics, friendships and quiet refreshing times. Like when we clean up the highway, eat pie and ice cream and play during VBS. Sometimes we miss it, like when the Church once taught that all things bodily – like enjoying food and drink, stargazing and desire – were base.

Through the millennia, people have expressed our awareness of life's goodness in different ways. Jesus speaks about this celebration of life as *abundant life*, as in God wants us to have life and have it abundantly, and as *eternal life*. Eternal life is my focus for today.

Have you ever watched someone sleep? Have you ever shared an embrace that left you unaware of the world around you? Or have you noticed that time can seem to stand still – during communion, or when you talk deeply with a friend, or when you are simply watching the grass grow? Describing such a moment, Jill wrote, “Worlds could have been born and died. I lived lifetimes in [that moment].”

This is eternal life. And this is what God wants for us – and what we want for ourselves, right? – to celebrate the sacred and the ordinary so profoundly that it takes our breath away.

I sat at table during a funeral lunch with some of the deceased extended family. After she finished eating, one woman started talking about her later-life friendship with the quiet man next to her. “I see God more clearly *through him* than I ever did before.” This is God's hope for us in all our relationships.

When we don't experience this, it does not mean we are with the wrong people. No. We can know God better through any connection. But we need to be paying attention. We want to be watching.

It has probably always been the case, but in the busyness of 21st century life, we can be doing all the right things and miss the best that life has for us. We have the cabin but miss the holy, there or here. We have tons of Facebook friends but miss the relationship. We have the job, the money, the clothes, the church, everything that we're told makes for a good life, but we don't notice that God is only a sometimes visitor to our days.

Don't you long to live lifetimes each day? God would like this for you. For Palm Sunday, we sang “Hymn of Promise.”

“In the bulb there is a flower. In the seed an apple tree...”
In our days and nights a promise; eternal life for you and me.

Abundant life, eternity, here and now, for you and me. This is what God has always wanted. Not only for us but for all the earth. This message can be spoiled when we interpret it to mean eternal, abundant life for people like me, who are white (or brown), straight, sis-gender, U.S. citizens, educated, Christian. Yet, God so loves *creation*, all of it. And as faithful Easter People, we are called to live with *that* understanding, taking only enough so that others may also have enough, recognizing that we are already stressing the carrying-capacity of our planet-home and living accordingly.

The more we live as God intends us to live, practicing caring, generosity and patience, the more we allow ourselves to experience the moments of our lives instead of racing through them, the more we find ourselves living eternally.

When we were children, we probably did this easily but most of us set aside this awareness as we took on the mantle of adulthood. Jesus speaks to this very thing when he says that we have to approach faith from a child's perspective. Otherwise we will never know eternal life.

We have been given a gift during this safer-at-home time. Yes, like all gifts it has two sides and we well know the side of fear, sickness and death, loss of employment and purpose. Still, there is a good side. In these days and weeks when we are distanced from those things that usually eat up

our time, we can give our attention to living each moment fully. (When we forget, we just go back to it.)

Watch your spouse, or your child, sleeping. Dance and sing and play like no one's around. Pray like you expect God to respond, right that moment. Hug the ones in your bubble as if they are the most precious ones on earth. Notice when you are so attuned to the moment that you lose track of time.

And as you do, you will experience eternal life.

Now, of course, Christian doctrine teaches that eternal life is both for this life and the life to come. We cannot leave without having said something about this.

Our God, as the familiar verse tells us, loves the cosmos so much that God sends Christ so that we might have eternal life. Loves us this much. And what God loves, God loves eternally. In part, this assures us that God will not let death be the end of our relationship. Our connection with God, and with all others, will continue even beyond death. We do not know what that might look like, but we do not have to.

Today we celebrate that having sent Christ to live among us and to teach us about eternal life, God does not let death have the last word. "Where, O Death, is thy sting?"

Christ lives. Death has no power over us. This is God's word for us today.

Halleluiah!

Amen.