

Today at St. Mark's we celebrate the end of a very unusual and, for many, a difficult school year. Congratulations to any graduates who are moving on in life and congratulations to everyone for simply getting through the year. Here's a school story to help us look at our readings for today and commemorate this occasion. I began teaching at Grace Episcopal Day School on Long Island some years and my very first class on my very first day the bishop shows up just to say hello. I hadn't been ordained yet and it was the first day on the job, so this was rather nerve wracking. And wouldn't you know the very first question was from a six year old boy who asked: my daddy says that there are no dinosaurs in heaven. Are there dinosaurs in heaven? Well, with all the adrenaline of a cornered animal, my brain began to move at an unbelievable speed and I prayed real hard and somehow out of my mouth came the reply: God loves all things that have been created and all things loved by God are with God forever and ever. I believed that then, and I believe that now. I stayed at the school three years until starting seminary and the father of the child didn't file a complaint with the school so I guess it worked.

I share this story because we use a lectionary in the Episcopal Church and our assigned readings today inconveniently ask us to wonder about eternal life. Which of course means they ask us to ponder death. We want to celebrate the end of a tough year so I don't find this to be very helpful. But I wonder: why was it a tough year? We know that there has been a pandemic going on all around us and it has directly impacted our lives. I have family members who have gotten sick and a good friend who has died from Covid-19 and this might be the case for some of you in church today. So, it actually does make sense to wonder about this difficult topic together, in God's presence, in church. After all, it is the reason school was more difficult or unusual than normal and it is the reason our lives have changed quite a bit this past year. With all of this and the news calculating the deaths and sickness from Covid-19, some of us may have pondered serious questions about life, death, and heaven.

Christians wonder about death in the context of our faith. [Faithful Living and Faithful Dying](#) is a collection of essays published by the Episcopal Church to help us with this. It mentions how the Book of Common Prayer has many places which guide us prayerfully through sickness and death both as individuals and as a community. We have a great tradition full of wonderful hymns, prayers, writings, and teachings which can guide us through difficult times and help us stay focused on God's love throughout our lives. One of my favorite parts of the funeral service in our prayer book is at the Commendation where we pray: *You only are immortal, the creator and maker of mankind; and we are mortal, formed of the earth, and to earth shall we return. For so did you ordain when you created me, saying, "You are dust and to dust you shall return." All of us go down to the dust, but even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.*

What incredibly inspiring and hopeful words. How wonderful to know that even at the time of death we might be able to sing alleluia. I remember a story my wife once told me while she was in a program as a hospital chaplain. She loved to visit with a woman who was very old and probably dying, because even though Sue was there to give her comfort, this woman's faith was an inspiration to Sue. She would always say: *I loves me some Jesus*, and under the covers give a little kick. What wonderful faith: to know she was dying but still stay focused on the love of God. It is no small thing.

You may see artwork from time to time with a famous person from the Church and on the side there will be a human skull. It's not meant to be creepy but to signify the deep spirituality this person had, such that he or she was able to find hope and joy in life even knowing that we will all die some day. Just like that woman at Harlem Hospital, these great people of the Church knew something in their hearts that can inspire us to trust in Jesus' words we hear in the gospel today: do not fear, only believe. Notice how everyone around Jesus is anxious and afraid in the face of illness and death, but he is calm and compassionate. This is the life of a Christian. This is how we are called to live.

Now some will say this is difficult. After all, who isn't afraid of dying; who isn't afraid of having a loved one die? And of course this is true. I remember on our honey moon, Sue and I almost crashed in an airplane. I remember almost falling off a cliff and having a friend reach out to grab my hand at the last second. And to wonder about someone I love dying, can be even worse. I appreciate that as Christians we don't have to pretend this isn't normal. Even our Book of Common Prayer acknowledges the natural fear of death. There is a beautiful prayer on page 504 that begins: *O God, whose days are without end and whose mercies cannot be numbered: Make us, we pray, deeply aware of the shortness and uncertainty of human life; and let your Holy Spirit lead us in holiness and righteousness all our days.* There is also Ash Wednesday when we impose the ashes with the words: remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. We do not deny the realities that come with death. It is difficult. But death isn't the end of the story.

When we say that Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega we mean that before all things, Jesus was, and after all things, Jesus will be. In other words, the love of God extends beyond eternity, and like those dinosaurs, all that God loves is with God forever. And God loves us all. Another way to think of this is another thing I would teach in Sunday school. I would ask: where does God live and of course the answer was: in heaven. Then I would ask is there any place where God does not exist and of course the answer was: no, God is everywhere. So I would conclude the logical formula with: well, if God lives in heaven and God is everywhere, then where is heaven? And with a little head scratching, someone would always say: everywhere. And this is true. The Bible calls this the Kingdom of God and Jesus says it is all around us and within us, we have only to choose to experience it. And this is why we live in faith and not in fear. This is why we know that death is a part of life but it does not have the final word. This is why the past year may have been deeply sad for so many of us who have died or watched a loved one die, but we can still carry on and experience the joys of life.

You may have read the [Chronicles of Narnia](#) or seen the movie. Aslan the Lion is supposed to be Jesus in the story. He dies and comes back to life and they ask how this is possible and he says that the wicked ones didn't understand the deeper magic. Because of the deeper magic, no one really dies. Christians understand the deeper magic. We understand the truth of the universe. We know that God loves us all and that God's love is beyond infinite and all that God loves is with God forever. So we know that through God, we also exist beyond infinity. Death may be scary but it doesn't have the final say. God does. And God says: I love you, and you will be with me forever. Therefore, as Jesus says, we do not fear, we believe.