

March 27th, 2016

Easter Sunday, Year C  
The Rev. Rob Fisher  
St. Dunstan's, Carmel Valley

**Texts: John 20:1-18**

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
The courage to change the things I can,  
And the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.*

Our daughter is growing really fast right now. Too fast. They say that parenthood brings the longest days and the shortest years. I used to tell her to slow down, but I've given up on that.

She is only in third grade, so she still uses a booster seat in the car.

It's much easier than it was when we used to have to lug around a giant car seat with five-point safety harnesses. Car seats seem to be designed to weigh at least twice what the infant or toddler weighs.

The surprising thing about the booster is that it's so simple, just a little lift over the regular seat height, and yet it still has a lot of rules and requirements that go with it. We've brought a booster for her on airplane flights, and have been told that she can't use the booster because it's not approved for air travel. What? Once we went to Vermont to visit my wife's father and accidentally left the booster behind, and we were really reckless parents (don't tell anybody, please!) but we actually let our daughter sit in the middle of the backseat with no booster at all for the whole trip. Very risky!

Boosters and car seats are just one way in we in our culture seem to almost worship the concept of safety.

Sometimes it seems in our culture we are better at fending off death than we are at really living.

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Theologian Diogenes Allen tells of a group of scientists who figured out a way to make certain insects live 30 to 40% longer. They held a conference about it, and asked Professor Allen to speak from a theological standpoint about eternal life. He pointed out that what the Bible means by eternal life is not merely life that goes on and on.

Eternal life means something really different.

It means life that touches eternity.

One of the people attending the conference didn't get his message, and he said to professor Allen, in a tone that was both giddy and hostile: You see, pretty soon we will be able to live forever with science, and we won't need any of you religious people anymore.

From this man's point of view, the only point in religion is to live forever. That's all that religion is good for.

The problem with his whole viewpoint—and these are my words, not Allen's—is that if you are a bug and you live 30% longer, you're still a bug.

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For a completely different way of being, you can go to Haiti and see what it's like. This parish has a huge ministry in Haiti, partnering with a sister parish in a city called Hinche, on Haiti's Central Plateau. The partnering we do with them has easily given us as much as it is given the people there over the 30 years we've worked together. Our main focus is helping build and support a school that now educates 1,200 students from preschool to high school seniors. One of the most exhilarating things I have gotten to do since coming to St. Dunstan's is to visit Haiti, where you can feel how alive the country is.

Once I was with a group of people, including the pastor of our sister parish, and we were driving from one village to another. We picked up some people on the road who needed a ride. These are rough dirt roads, and you need four-wheel drive to get around. I was sitting in the middle of the back seat, and I got the distinct impression that the woman next to me had not ridden in

a regular car very many times in her life. Being an American, and being conditioned to be highly responsible and safe, I felt like I needed to show her how to wear a seatbelt. She struggled to get it buckled, but eventually just looped the belt around her shoulder and looked at me as if to say, “This is good enough, leave me alone. Look, I’m being very safe now.”

They say that there are two kinds of people who go to Haiti – some who want to leave as soon as possible and never go back. And some who can’t wait to return as soon as possible. I am in the latter category! I’ve talked with others who feel the same, and it’s hard to describe what it is about the country that draws us so much. It’s not a comfortable or safe place to be. And yet there is a joy felt in the quality of life as it is lived there.

And here’s the theory I’ve developed about why Haiti feels so full of life...

It’s because in Haiti people live in spite of being faced by the possibility of death every day.

And so while the real threat of death can be felt more in every moment, life is lived even more fully.

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You can’t talk about resurrection . . .

You can’t talk about Easter . . .

You can’t talk about life *beyond* the grave . . . without acknowledging the grave itself.

The good news is that even in the face of death, we are invited to live.

Jesus did not say, “I have come to bring you less death!” (Perhaps religion has said that, but Jesus never said that.)

No, he said “I have come so that you may have life, and have it abundantly!”

And there is a big difference between a message of less death, versus more life.

The life that we celebrate at Easter—the life of resurrection and rebirth—is life that has passed through and swallowed death up. But it never shied away from death.

Even Jesus did not avoid death, but he experienced it, just like you and I will.

(By the way, it's been said that studies show the death rate in this country remains at 100%.)

My point is not that death is good, or that we should speed it along.

Rather, we should not fear it. We should not let it stop us from being fully alive today. I believe that God's time is not the same as our time, and that one moment can hold all eternity in God's view—so eternal life is not something in the future, but it begins this. Very. Moment.

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I spent a lot of time as a hospital chaplain before becoming ordained. I think that having grown up in a somewhat sheltered, safe, suburban California environment, I grew a lot by being exposed to the sort of things you experience in hospitals, where the barriers that keep us safe sometimes become very thin. It can be a lot like Haiti.

I spent a whole year as a full-time chaplain at a hospital in Brooklyn, New York, and for part of that year I was the chaplain for the cancer wing.

I remember two patients, and will never forget them, who were roommates. It was a nice hospital, but not like the hospital here, where patients all get their own rooms. These two shared a room, with only a curtain to separate their sides of the room.

The patient on the side of the curtain near the door was dying of cancer, and he was angry about it. He would yell at me, at his family members, and the doctors and nurses. I think he even threw a tray of food once.

I knew that I, the chaplain, was not welcome to visit him. But the hitch was that, like I said earlier, he had a roommate. His roommate was also dying of cancer. The way that I remember this man is that he was filled with light.

It was actually almost funny, to have to walk quickly past one man, and hope to not have anything thrown at me, in order to visit with the other man, who touched my soul surely more than I ever touched his.

I don't want to say that it's usually so black and white, or that one of these men is a hero and the other is a villain—because I think in truth we all have both sides in us.

And Jesus wants us to let go of the fear that makes us unable to receive life, and to nurture the part of us that can live in love even in the face of death.

This is an option for us all. We can choose it, with God's grace to help us.

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As the poet said, death is just a horizon. And a horizon is nothing but the limit of our sight. There is more beyond. It's not for us to know all the details, but even without knowing it *is* for us to live fully this day. If you have known love, if you have really let love touch your heart, you have touched eternal life today. You have touched the risen Christ.

We don't come to church to be protected from anything bad happening in our lives.

We don't come to church with the illusion that it will keep us safe in everything we do.

We come to experience the truth that no matter what, we are beloved, that God is with us no matter what, and that today is a gift.

Jesus came so that we might have life, and have it in abundance—and that we would share this good news of life with the rest of the world.

—*Amen.*