

Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost (A/RCL)  
Philippians 3.4b-14  
October 5, 2008  
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

We bless the animals this weekend, here at Holy Trinity. October 4 is the heavenly birthday of St. Francis of Assisi, so we always pause on the first Sunday of this month to commend the critters he and we love so well into God's care. Keeping with that theme, it seems fitting to mention that Cape May is bird watcher Mecca at this time of year. Birds aren't the only ones migrating, though. The monarch butterfly is also heading south of the border to its winter home. My sister Sally was sitting in a restaurant across from the Cape May beach last week. She and her friends at one point held their forks in mid-air, so awestruck were they by a cloud of hundreds of butterflies that flew past. Sally's friend who lives down there said that earlier in the month the sun was almost blotted out by the thousands, tens of thousands of butterflies who passed over Cape May on their way to Mexico.... It was a gorgeous mass exodus.

I wish I had been there to see that resurrection sight. From way back when, the butterfly has been a symbol of resurrection, gloriously emerging as it does from a dead-looking chrysalis, having been transformed from a tiny egg on a leaf into a fuzzy, amazing-growing-munching caterpillar, spinning itself into an apparently lifeless cocoon and then revealing itself as the most beautiful insect of all.

This weekend's lesson from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians talks about resurrection, too. This is very good timing, because two members of our church family died to this earthly life and entered eternal life this past week: Marilou Finan and Kerry Hudson. Our church family is feeling the sting of death and the sadness of parting. Even if you didn't know them, you certainly know the pain of separation from your own loved ones who have died. I have heard people say with disappointment, puzzlement, sometimes anger, that they prayed for miracles, which they didn't receive. But perhaps what would have been a miracle for us would not have

been a miracle for them. The “miracle” of cancer being halted and even reversed would have been welcomed wholeheartedly. They would have had more time in this world, which would have been great for us, but they would still have faced death on another day,

The most important miracle in any of our lives has already happened. It happened a long time before any of us drew our first breath. That miracle is the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. After being crucified on Calvary, He was dead, beyond a doubt; then, by the Father’s love and power, He became alive again. Through Holy Baptism, both the sorrow of Christ’s suffering and death, and the joy of His risen life are ours. Drowned to sin, submerged in His death and then emerging, rising up from the lifegiving waters of Holy Baptism, we come to share in our Savior’s resurrection, as Jack Ryan will today.

Last weekend on our women’s retreat we studied and discussed this passage from Philippians for a full hour. We saw only the tip of the iceberg. We were drawn to verses 11 and 12, in which Paul mentions resurrection first and last, with suffering sandwiched in between. It’s like Easter standing as a pair of bookends on either side of Good Friday:

I want to know Christ and the power of his **resurrection** and the sharing of his **sufferings** by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the **resurrection** from the dead. (Philippians 3.10-11)

By mentioning resurrection first, Paul is reminding us that resurrection isn’t just “later,” it’s not just on the other side of death for Marilou, for Kerry, for the family members and friends whose passing has shaken us most, or for ourselves. By talking about the power of the resurrection like he does, Paul is saying there is an energy exploding into **this** life and not just the **next**, generated by the Father raising Christ from the dead **then**, and continuing **now** and into the future.

This resurrection power is visible in the lives of people who have been led into healthy recovery after having their lives almost snuffed out by addiction to alcohol or drugs. It’s the power alive in the lives of people who had lost their reason for living and who have graciously found new and compelling reasons to live and love and serve. Resurrection power radiates from

the lives of those like Kerry and Marilou who face serious illness of any kind with grace and good humor, with ever-deepening faith and endless hope. It's the power of caregivers who alternately offer TLC and tough love to those in their care, who shoulder heavy burdens with little or no complaint and for no reason other than love. Resurrection power is present, too, in those who weather the long and difficult season of grief and who emerge to comfort others. It's the power which informs the vision of one of our congregational leaders who has reflected:

We rejoice that two more voices sing with the assembled Church Triumphant, but grieve that we will never hear [Kerry and Marilou's] voices in this world again. Let us bring, with our new members [being received in a couple weeks], new hands and hearts to do Christ's work here at the Jersey Shore. They cannot replace Kerry or Marilou, but they can feed the hungry, care for the sick, tell their own story of grace, and bring their own special light to this dark and fallen world. Let's encourage their spark of faith to burn as a flame so bright that all the world wonders.

Even and especially in the midst of deflated dividends and reeling retirement accounts, even and especially in the midst of loss, whether it be personal, financial, or physical, even and especially when we don't recognize God's response to our prayers as anything we actually prayed for, let us allow the Holy Spirit to harness the power of the resurrection for ourselves and for others. Let us trust that our and others' present suffering is bracketed, contained, redeemed by the resurrection of Christ. Let us remember that our Lord walked this sorrowful way long before we did, and still makes it holy by His presence. Let us hold on for dear life to the promise of the resurrection, pledged to us in our baptismal dying and rising. And let us rejoice that though the butterflies disappear from sight in Cape May, they are welcomed with love and gratitude on another shore. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

