

The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
February (10 &) 11, 2007
Sermon by The Rev Timothy A Leitzke

I was nearing the end of my hospital chaplaincy—in fact, I think it was my last night on-call. I was still terrified that I'd sleep through a call, so I set the on-call pager to the most horrifying, blood curdling shriek I could. At about 5:30 that morning it worked. It was a call from an ICU: a young woman was dying. I got dressed and came down to the ICU. Her family was waiting, tearfully, outside the ICU door. Slowly, their story came out. The young woman had been trying to sleep but had complained of a terrible headache. In the middle of the night her 3 year old daughter heard her making some unusual noise and came into the bedroom and tried, unsuccessfully, to wake her. That effort *did* wake the husband, who called 911. The paramedics had come, and taken her to the hospital, and the word was that she had a hemorrhage in the brain, one that wasn't going to stop. She had hours to live. Her older sister was telling me this, and she was about 27—my age now—which made the dying woman about 23—my age then. It was the end of any pretense I had that I wasn't going to die some day. I guess I'd always just assumed that you deserved at least 70 years. Now, I didn't think so. At any moment any of countless things could happen to me. There was nothing to keep me from dying from a sudden hemorrhage in the middle of the night.

I don't know what I would do without the faith that God gives me; if I had not had faith then, I'd have quit trying that morning in the hospital. Shaky as I was, though, God kept giving faith, that lifeline to God, and I resolved two things.

There had to be more to life than this, and while my life *was* this I was going to do my best not to sweat the petty stuff—I was on borrowed time, anyway. I'd always been trapped in this dualism, this binary psychosis, that either all flesh was evil and should be escaped from spiritually or that there was nothing else for us than this life in the flesh so I should enjoy it no matter what the consequences. The world tries to sell us both of those things, and frankly neither one works very well. I'm not some spirit person inhabiting my body; I *am* my body. If something happens to my body it happens to me. I need to know if God cares at all about this body that God has made, and that when it dies that's not the end of my story.

Friends of Christ, our faith is that our lives do matter to God, and that death is not the end of the story. The Bible tells us that our lives matter. The flesh might be sinful but God created it, God called it good, and God stayed faithful to it even when it was unfaithful to God. If our lives didn't matter to God then the Bible would be empty, because we'd have to throw out all the parts where God gets involved with us and that would be all of them! If the life we now live in the flesh matters, then our reward is not going to be the destruction of our flesh. Whatever we get after death will be flesh, too. If our goal is to escape from these sinful bodies and lead a spirit-only existence, we're in the wrong place. We're wasting our time. Just as, if death is the end, we're wasting a golden opportunity for hedonism by denying ourselves. If in this life only we have faith in Christ we are of all people the most pitiable.

The resurrection of Christ was a resurrection of the body. It wasn't a ghost or a reanimated Zombie Jesus. It was Jesus changed, immortal, and perfect: resurrected as Jesus the Christ, the one chosen by God to reveal God's promise of resurrection to each of us. The resurrection is the heart and soul of Christianity. Without it, we don't exist. There is no hope. Without the resurrection, existence is futile. Without the resurrection, God's creation is evil and its purpose is to be destroyed. Without the resurrection, all we can know is pain. Without the resurrection we are wasting our time, we should close the doors and go home. The resurrection is our hope. I know I'm getting older and that I am going to die. The resurrection is my hope that my life is worth something, my hope that God is in my life, renewing my life and healing my life. The resurrection is my hope that God values my life enough to give me a new one, an immortal one with God forever.

St Paul calls Jesus the Christ the first fruits of the dead. The first fruits in ancient Israel were given over to God. The firstborn calf of the new year, the first wheat harvest of the season, the first of everything was burned at the altar in a sacrifice of thanksgiving. Even the firstborn son was dedicated to God's service. The faithful gave their first fruits to God with the faith that God would provide more. They took a great risk with their livelihoods, trusting God to provide what they needed. In the same manner Christ is the first fruits of the dead, the first resurrected, and we, the members of Christ's Church, live in the faith that God

will resurrect us, too. Our resurrection is as good as done, and yet it has not even begun.

We live in that already/not yet reality. The resurrection is already ours; the resurrection is not yet ours. God is already with us; we are not yet fully with God. We know already that we are saved; our salvation is not yet realized, and won't be until the end of time. It's how, in St Luke's gospel, Jesus can mix tenses and say, 'Blessed *are* the ones hungry now, because you *shall be* satisfied. Blessed *are* the ones weeping now, because you *shall* laugh.' They *are* blessed now—their lives and bodies matter to God, God suffers with them when they suffer, and God works now to do good things in them, for them, and through them. They *shall be* satisfied, they *shall* laugh, and they *shall be* raised immortal to live eternally with God.

Friends of Christ, we are important enough to God that God is going to make us new, building our bodies again, imperishable. Life is so important to God, so good to God, that God is going to give us a new one, one without end. God loves us so much that God is present with us right now in this sinful world, feeding hungry bellies, wiping away mournful tears, building up the poor, embracing us in our darkest hours, through God's Son, Jesus the Christ. As we have been baptized in Christ we now live as God's people for the life of the world, following in Christ's footsteps. We live as Christ lived. As Christ died, so shall we one day die. As Christ is arisen, we shall arise. Amen