

Credo VI – “I believe . . . in the life everlasting”

April 9, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania
Palm Sunday (Passion Sunday), Year A
(Part 6 of a Sermon Series)

Text: “After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”

Revelation 7:9-10, NRSV



(Image source: <https://interruptingthesilence.com/tag/palm-sunday/>)

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

I believe in the Life Everlasting! This seems rather redundant coming as it does on the heels of last week’s phrase: “the resurrection of the body.” Part of this redundancy may be due to the curiosity of language. The creed in Latin and Greek use a word for resurrection that can also mean

"resuscitation." Resuscitation is not the same thing as resurrection. I believe in the resurrection of the body – meaning, the life everlasting – in case you didn't get my drift.

One of the first things we must say about this, of course, is that we are not talking about a belief that is discontinuous with this life. The life everlasting is not something we believe is out there to be gained later – It is not something that is still to come, it is part and parcel of what we are already living now; and will continue to live into as we cross the threshold from this life into eternity.

We embraced that life the moment we entered into the waters of baptism – for in doing so we embraced the life God extends to us in being part of his larger family. We put on Christ – we wear his robes – putting on Christ and the life he has for us. When we die, we take up a new set of clothes that become our eternal raiment; our gowns of glory.

There is a tradition the church has lost, to its diminishment, the use of the funeral pall. What is a pall? It is a large brocaded or linen cloth – white in color – often adorned with a cross or other Christian symbol that drapes the casket. . . It is meant to be a visual reminder for those who remain behind that in death, the one going home to God, has clothed himself or herself in Christ . . . That in this death, the life, once begun in the love of God through the refreshing waters of baptism, is now completed in the new life that is promised for the resurrection of the dead in Christ – the life everlasting where the thirsty may drink anew in the springs of the water of life beyond the end of days. I have served churches where we have had them in use, but many do not have them. Trinity has one; we have used it on those seasons that call for white antependia and sanctuary decorations; it has even been placed on the communion table when our usual white linen was misplaced!

"See, I make all things new," says the Alpha and Omega – Jesus Christ the eternal Lord of love. The life everlasting has already begun for us. When we say we believe in it, we are saying that it is already at work and continues on – despite come what may.

Some while ago, my computer “crashed and burned” . . . It held a lot of things: email addresses, sermons, bulletins, lecture notes, exams and links to really good websites . . . It was full of stuff – great audio and video files . . . locked up and frozen beyond the PC “blue-screen” of death.

I guess I could and should have been overwhelmed by the loss, but wasn’t really . . . My computer is a big part of my work, but it isn’t my life – backed up files or not.

A few years back, Elaine and I saw a play at the Pittsburgh Public Theatre called, “*Superior Donuts*”. It is a play that has not so much to do about a donut shop in Chicago’s uptown as it has to do with people meeting and being, loving and living. It is a great play about life.

What *is* life? What parts of that life would you like to have live forever?

I believe in the life everlasting . . . I believe in the life everlasting.

What is worth keeping? What is able to be lost? What is it that you need to hold onto that is worth keeping? What do you clutch with tightened hands that need to be let go?

A pastor friend visited a woman in the hospital who did not want to see anyone. She was bitter and angry in the last bits and pieces of her life – it was late in the day for her – before the sunset comes; and she was quietly raging into “that good night.” The pastor noticed her whitened knuckles at the edges of her blanket. He said nothing, but reached for her hands and gently unfolded each finger into open palms, then took her empty hands and filled them with his own. Only then did he ask if she wanted him to pray for her.

Sometimes we are so full of our own clenched fists that we cannot possibly grab hold of life – the-life-everlasting-kind-of-life because we’re too fool of the stuff in our hands that we can’t let go of stuff that is so pitifully less important: the anger left-over from a decade long hurt; the embarrassment that seemed to be the world to you that nobody else noticed at the time; the snub that seemed so monumental that day, that you felt like all of who you were drained out of you onto the pavement when they didn’t come as they promised, but forgot . . .

I visited a man in a church years ago who I didn't know, personally, he never came to church, but was still on the church rolls. I entered his hospital room and introduced myself. Through conversation I discovered he had had a falling out with a previous pastor and had stopped coming to church. When I enquired which pastor that had been I was shocked to discover the man had been the pastor twenty-five years before! And was now dead and gone home to Jesus! . . . What point is there to holding a grudge that long? Truly!

To grab hold of the life that really is life – “ever-lasting-kind-of-life” we have to be willing to let go of other things, sometimes. And when we let go of that stuff, we have more room to hold onto the life that really is life!

Elaine, my wife, has a way of helping us to remember the moments that can never be captured by a camera shutter. She holds up an imaginary camera and clicks the imaginary shutter – *click!* As much to say that this moment is memorable for all that it is – but no camera can capture or contain it, so remember it here (in your head) and here (in your heart).

Robert Morris University, where I teach, has had a Buddhist monk in residence making a sand painting in the library there. It is a carefully wrought, beautiful and intricate work of art that is made over days and days of careful creation. In Buddhist custom, when the painting is completed, it will be swept up into a pile, walked down to a stream (a place of living water) and all the now-mixed sand scattered. By doing this, they recognize the impermanence of things, while recognizing the extraordinary blessing that those things have been in the creation of them.

Such overwhelming moments of grandeur cannot be captured by ordinary means – that's the way with the life that I believe is everlasting: the God-infused, blessed magnificence that cannot be adequately contained or expressed in the ordinary and everyday ways of the world.

I affirm that in being an eternal member of God's family, you and I are privy to moments that defy our capacity to nail them down into places, or pigeon-hole them into spaces, like we do other

things . . . We do that with so much, otherwise, and oftentimes with people, too. Reduce them to categories: the crazies over there; the annoying ones over here; the petty ones back there; the funny one right there; the special ones, right here . . .

But we do not live among mere mortals . . .

I am fond of the work of C. S. Lewis. He was one of the great defenders of Christian faith in the twentieth century. He is the one who first led me to that belief just expressed: "*We do not live among mere mortals.*" We are, every day, living alongside eternally-weighted beings – beings that in the ordinary business of living we snub or ignore, find nauseating, callous, or cruel that, were we to see them in their eternal splendor – as God sees them by his grace, always – we would be severely tempted to fall on our knees and worship. . . *My neighbor?* The guy who always borrows my stuff, but never returns any of it? . . . Not Uncle Chummy? He always takes the last of the gravy at Thanksgiving – it drives me crazy! Cruella, the bingo princess, who always pushes her cards too far over the table on to my pile? – You're not serious.

Yes, I am. I believe in the life everlasting.

When we affirm this belief, not only are we extending the idea of the resurrection as an unbroken continuation of ourselves in Christ, but also the sacredness of the life of others not ourselves! We do not live among mere mortals, but among those whom God in his Christ deems worthy of saving – who are, like ourselves, eternally precious.

It isn't always so hard to affirm life everlasting . . . There are moments [clicking the imaginary camera!] that make it more a wonder to love and cherish . . . And that, too, is meant to be in God's good keeping of us all.

When Mother Silbert went home to Jesus on Christmas Day in December of 2010, it was late in the afternoon when the sky was all rose and flame and beautiful as only winter skies can be. Mother had been slipping in and out of consciousness in the last day or so. She kept calling for her "Mama" in

those moments when she seemed to be "here", but then, she got quiet, too. My sister, D.A., named these moments well . . . As I called prior to heading home to Rhode Island, I asked how Mother was doing . . . "Well," D. A. said through tears, "I think she is busy putting on her gown of glory. . ."

When we cross over the threshold into that shining world that will be the place that has always been the home we've longed to go to; life will be transformed in beautiful and fresh new ways – everlasting ways. . .

The Alpha and the Omega – the One who is the A to Z of life – says, "See, I am making all things new. These things are trustworthy and true."

As you enter into Holy Week – let go of the things that whiten your knuckles and keep you bound in order to grab hold of the life that really is life and keep it forever.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.