

“In the Midst of Life We Are in Death”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Bruton Parish Church – Williamsburg, VA
2 Easter, April 11, 2021
Acts 4:32-35, John 20:19-31

All week I’ve heard the words, “In the midst of life we are in death” over and over in my head in a way that is usually reserved for song lyrics. They’re the words of one of the anthems used in the Burial rites in the Book of Common Prayer, words originally part of a Gregorian chant sung in medieval times.

I heard them on Tuesday morning as I blessed Benny and Kelsey Zhang’s baby daughter, Evelyn Joy, and their family member’s new puppy, Hank, as we stood in their front yard on a beautiful spring morning, and I heard them on Thursday afternoon here in the churchyard as we buried Bill Conkling in the presence of his wife and family and friends.

In the midst of life we are in death.

I heard them on Easter Sunday as we celebrated the joy of Jesus’ resurrection with the flower cross and lily towers, with glorious music and our largest gathering in more than a year, and I heard them as we remembered the anniversary of the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on that same day.

In the midst of life we are in death.

As I watched the news of millions of people racing to get vaccines, hoping in the promise of a new post-pandemic normal, and as I listened to concerned experts talk about new variants and mutations of the virus that threaten our tender shoots of hope, I heard the words again.

In the midst of life we are in death.

On Thursday I heard them as I noticed wisteria blooms and dogwood blossoms, tulips and redbuds and myriad flowers bursting forth in the vivid colors of new life amid swirling pollen, and again I heard them as I stood at the bedside of Marty Jones with Deacon Jan and her husband and children saying the litany at the time of death and commending her Christian soul into God's hands. And again I heard them in the middle of the night when I woke with tears leaking out of my eyes.

In the midst of life we are in death.

I find it extra hard in this season of Easter and of new life to understand death as part of life. Somehow it makes more sense to lose a loved one when all the earth is hibernating. And yet, death is a part of life, as surely as birth. In all seasons both life and death are with us.

We don't always read this particular anthem at funerals; it's one of several options.

The whole verse says,

In the midst of life we are in death;
from whom can we seek help?
From you alone, O Lord,
who by our sins are justly angered.

That last line is the sticking point. We don't want to think about our sins angering God – some of us have heard too much about God's anger and too little about God's love, and being preached to about our sinful nature can simply increase our self-loathing and cause us to forget that we are created good in God's image and beloved of God even in our sinful humanity.

But if we think about it calmly, I'm sure most of us can agree that of course our good God is angered, or justly displeased, with those wrongs we have thought, said, and done and with those things we have left undone. We are often angry with ourselves and others for our sins – doesn't it just make sense that God would be angry too? I imagine God is also saddened, disappointed, and hurt by the harms we do to others and ourselves and by the ways we fail to love God and our neighbors.

When we say that God is justly angered by our sins, we are not saying that God's wrath is the last word. Goodness no. Because of Jesus, sin doesn't have the final word, and neither does death. In the midst of life we are in death. In the midst of all the good we are and do, we are caught up in sin. We're all going to die and we're all going to sin. That's just the way it is. From whom can we seek help? From God alone. God doesn't remain angry. God forgives. To me, nowhere is that clearer than in our Gospel story today.

If there's anyone who deserves to be angry, disappointed, and hurt, it's Jesus. His disciples betrayed him, denied him, and abandoned him, and he was left to face torture and execution alone. Even when they heard that he was alive again, they locked themselves in a room in fear, hiding so that the same thing that happened to him would not happen to them.

Can you imagine sitting there when he appears? Of course they were scared! And I'm guessing it wasn't only because of the Judaeen authorities. They had failed him – what would he have to say to them now?

When Jesus arrives, he expresses no anger, no hurt, no disappointment in his disciples. Peace, he says. Peace be with you. And then he sends them out, as God has sent him, to forgive. Not for revenge, but to forgive. Not to do penance but to forgive. Not in guilt and shame but with full knowledge that Jesus has seen them, known their sin, and forgiven them. He has released them, freed them, and sent them out to do the same for others.

This story isn't about the doubt of Thomas. It's about Jesus. It's about the peace and forgiveness that he brings and about the Spirit that he breathes into his disciples.

What a game changer – no angry sermons or iteration of wrongs. Only peace. Only love. Only forgiveness and renewal of purpose. For all of them.

Look what that message did. We hear in Acts about how the disciples go out and begin preaching about the power of the resurrection and the forgiveness of sins. Neither death nor sin has the final word! Their message was so powerful that thousands flocked to hear this good news, and there was not a needy person among them. There was not a needy person among them. Now that's a potent message.

Every day we are in the midst of life and in the midst of death. A friend said to me this week, "Earth is like an airport – people are always coming and going." New babies, new life, new growth – all these are arriving.

And at the same so many things and so many people are passing away.

When the losses hit us hard, and when our sins seem to weigh us down, we may forget to remember and to believe that Christ is risen indeed. Christ has conquered fear, sin, and death.

In the midst of life we are in death,

From whom can we seek help?

From you alone, O Lord.

From you alone, our Lord and our God.