

## **“Eternal Life”**

**Mr. Eric Post  
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Sunday, April 17, 2016  
Fourth Sunday of Easter**

**Readings from Scripture: Acts 9:36-43, John 10:22-30 and Revelation 7:9-17**

*Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, “Please come to us without delay.” So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, “Tabitha, get up.” Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.*

*Acts 9: 36-43*

*At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” Jesus answered, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.*

*John 10:22-30*

*After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, for 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!”*

*And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”*

*Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”*

*Revelation 7:9-17*

This is my third, and last time preaching during my internship here. I have been honored and blessed to work under the supervision of your pastor, the Rev. Dr. David Holyan, and your associate pastor, the Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard. They have been extremely generous in sharing their time and gifts with me, helping me prepare to undertake my own ministerial path. I am equally grateful for all of you, you who have made me feel absolutely welcome, and offered words of encouragement and reflection that I will always carry with me.

At seminary these days, there's kind of an ominous subtext to everything we do. In various ways, we're basically told that much of the church is dying a slow death. We're warned to lower our vocational expectations, to plan on having a dual career, and, most of all, to find new and innovative ways to make church relevant and vital again. We're advised not to take the easy path, not to build up church attendance by appealing to our culture's love for individualism. That mega-church, "personal-relationship-with-Jesus" stuff is all fine and good, but without being grounded in a genuine sense of community, something vital is missing from the Christian life. Christianity, after all, is a team sport. Doing it on your own is like playing solo-soccer. Good luck with that.

And at the same time, it often feels to me like what they teach at seminary too often denies the importance of the individual. So much emphasis is placed on helping those outside the church walls, that the folks within congregations might be given short shrift. We're so worried about not allowing church to become a glorified country club that we sometimes risk letting it become little more than a glorified social service agency.

How pleasantly surprised, then, I was to find a balanced approach being taken here at Kirkwood Pres. I don't mean to flatter you all, but you should be aware that what you are doing here is the kind of positive thing that the folks at seminary say is hardly happening in churches today! I could go on about what impresses me here, but the main thing is how well you all take care of one another, while also remaining focused on the world around you. Instead of shaming yourselves or others into action, you acknowledge your hurt and brokenness, and respond by healing yourselves, and one another--and the world in kind--with God's help. No church is perfect. Each one is a constant work in progress. But real church means being human together, living in community--not perfectly--but faithfully and ALL that entails. From what I've seen here, I believe that this community is well on its way.

Healing is something that this church is all too familiar with, and in ways that few outside of it could fully understand. I tread lightly here, because I know that I am on hallowed ground. Those who were present during the tragedy that so profoundly impacted this community in 2008 have an understanding of church that many of us can only imagine. Even those who have joined in more recent times are likely well aware of the ways that this church's response to tragedy remains a part of its very character. This is a church community that is well aware of the brokenness that exists in the world, and the importance of healing. This is a community that is prepared to offer healing where it is needed most. That is part of the reason that I wanted to work here.

I believe that when we do church well--when we attend to the needs of the individual, the church community, AND the entire world--we begin to catch glimpses of what is known as "eternal life." Through these last eight months, I've looked out into the sanctuary during worship and I've seen in your faces a real humility. Whatever your age, background, or level of accomplishment, you each arrive here as equal partners of faith, acknowledging your vulnerability, and your dependence upon an all-powerful and loving God. In joining with you in worship each Sunday, I've felt the power in these rooms, these gatherings. That by joining together in faith, by trusting in the Holy Spirit to guide us and provide for us as a community, we begin, in some intangible way, to come to know eternal life--together.

Together. Together we profess our brokenness--as individuals and as a people--and our need for help from one another, and especially, from God. Together--we remember and partake of the table set for us by the Lord. Together--we set a *new* table for those who are hungry. Together--we live our lives as witnesses to the one who offers us hope. The one who is the source of all life, the one from whom our lives can never be snatched away.

Though our physical lives may be finite, Christ has graced us with another option for understanding our existence. Though we may not personally witness the kind of resurrection from the dead described in the Gospels and the book of Acts, we certainly are offered glimpses of resurrection taking place all around us every day. Folks recovering from addiction, others healing from an emotional ailment or physical illness. Family members or former friends making peace, even after thoughts of reconciliation had long since faded away. Hope renewed even when all such hope is gone.

The idea of eternal life almost goes against the grain of our society, though. As a culture, we're obsessed with youth. Media and advertisers will readily admit that they cater to an extremely narrow age demographic. Movies and television shows idealize young adulthood as the peak of our human existence, as if experience and wisdom counted for very little. Those who fall outside of that narrow age range--what? 16 to 35?--are in many ways treated as second class citizens. Childcare and eldercare workers are some of the lowest paid professions in our society. We may dote on our *young children* in other ways, but our seniors too often receive a raw deal.

In my chaplaincy work in retirement communities, I've been saddened to find many elders suffering from severe isolation and loneliness. Much of my work has involved simply helping people to recognize and validate their own worth in spite of being largely forgotten and abandoned by society, or worse, by their own families. The sadder aspects of the lives of our elderly is not the whole story, though. The aides and nurses in assisted living facilities do an incredible job of bringing comfort, and even joy into the lives of elders. And others have joined in a kind of mission (if you will) to bring healing and new life into the worlds of older adults.

A recent piece by Jane Brody in the New York Times describes a decades-long movement to bring music, art, and even dance to our most elderly in ways that enrich and enhance the quality of their lives. Across the country, participation in the arts in a variety of forms is enhancing the lives of older people, even helping to keep many out of nursing homes. With grants from organizations like the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Institute on Aging, some incredibly dedicated individuals with backgrounds in the arts have established programs that use music, dance, painting, quilting, singing, poetry writing and storytelling to add meaning, joy and a vibrant sense of well-being to the lives of older people. In many cases, the health of seniors engaged in these creative activities significantly improves relative to those who are not.

One such project outfits people who are in advanced stages of dementia with iPods filled with music from their past. Many who otherwise display little cognitive response to those around them, suddenly become positively engaged with their surroundings and with others once they hear the sound of familiar music.

Another program being implemented across the country fosters seniors' creative interests in all art forms, and is even developing art colonies within senior residences. Seniors take arts classes in the visual and performing arts, and even have the chance to see their artistic creations come to life on stage.

One of the most impressive programs is called Dances for a Variable Population, which gets older adults moving in ways they may not have imagined was still possible. People who have hardly moved in years participate, even those who can no longer stand. The effect is healing. According to the program's creator, Naomi Goldberg Haas, "Movement enriches the quality of lives. Balance, mobility, strength--everything

improves.” For up to 36 weeks, disadvantaged seniors receive free dance instruction, followed by a public performance of their work. If you look up some of these online (again they are called Dances for a Variable Population) you will no doubt be moved as I was--to see a highly diverse group of people, including those of advanced age--on their feet, in walkers, and in wheelchairs, moving gracefully and beautifully to the choreography that they helped to create.

I don't think any of us can say for certain what happens to our bodies and our souls when we die. I admit that I find some comfort in the promises about the hereafter that are offered in scripture. But when it comes to that other dimension of eternal life that Jesus talks about, the one he repeatedly describes in the present tense, I feel like I kind of know what he means.

There are times in my own life when I've felt as though I have tapped into the well, when the glory of being fully in and even beyond the moment envelopes me and causes me to feel that I exist in a realm independent of time and its related baggage. While I've been in the midst of the creative process, when falling in love, when doing work that helps others or helps the earth--any kind of activity that involves me getting out of my own skin and stops me from worrying about my own wants and needs. For me, this work (ministry) is the closest I've come to knowing what Jesus means when he says the words “eternal life.” This is why I've accepted the call to ministry, why I am here today, but as you know, ministry is not just about professional vocation. It also describes what all Christians do as witness to our own faith experience. What this and all churches do as communities of faith.

So how does this translate to our daily lives? You know, for a while there, our culture seemed preoccupied with vampires. We are now a society fascinated with zombies. I'm not sure why, except that perhaps on some level we each feel that we are among the walking dead. Going through the motions, plodding along, doing what we think we are supposed to. We jump from one hoop to another, forgetting along the way why we set out on our journey in the first place. Oh to be healed, to be offered a chance at resurrection, to know again what it is to feel completely alive. I have a crazy idea for you. It may sound kind of evangelical, it may sound kind of corny. I believe that this--here, this community of Church is where we can all experience new life. Where we all can come to know even eternal life. God is life eternal, and together, and only together, with God's help, we just might come to know what that is.