

LIFT UP THINE EYES

The Rev. J. Donald Waring
Grace Church in New York
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Lift up thine eyes round about, and see: all they gather themselves together, they come to thee: thy sons shall come from afar, and thy daughters shall be nursed at thy side. (Isaiah 60:4)

Last month I made a quick trip to my mother's home to celebrate her birthday dinner with my two brothers. As always when we gather ourselves together, stories from the olden days flowed with the wine as we enriched and clarified each other's memories. One incident we recalled was the day my older brother Steve went missing. It was the 1960s in East Orange, NJ – a time and a place when you wouldn't worry about allowing a 2nd grader to walk alone to and from school. One afternoon Steve began the trek home but did not arrive at the appointed time. As the minutes passed my mother grew increasingly concerned, and she eventually phoned my father at work. Dad immediately got in the car and began tracing Steve's route, arriving home with no Steve. These were the days before cell phones and Amber alerts. Not knowing what to do, my parents paced the sidewalk in front of the house, calling his name. I can still remember their growing panic. He was more than an hour late. It was every parent's worst nightmare.

My mother recalls that suddenly, just when they were about to call the police, Steve appeared at the end of the block, nonchalantly walking up the street. When my father spotted him, he sprang into action, and I remember it vividly. Still to this day I don't think I have ever seen anyone sprint a quarter mile faster than Dad did that afternoon. It was as if his feet never touched the ground. When he reached Steve he grabbed him, picked him up, raced back to the front lawn, and plunked him down on the grass where my mother proceeded to shower him with tearful hugs and kisses. Steve recalls that had no idea what was going on; he'd merely stopped to play at the home of some bigger boys who lived around the corner. But for my parents, it was the recovery of one they feared was lost. They had come to the brink of an unthinkable disaster and had been pulled back from it. Their relief and joy were uncontainable.

Today is All Saints' Sunday, a day on the Christian calendar when we celebrate a wonderful and sacred mystery called the Communion of Saints. Essentially, what we mean by the Communion of Saints is that God's people compose a family. To be sure, it is a family that is often riven by strife and divided by death. But God's intention – God's promise is to restore all people to unity with himself and each other through Jesus Christ. In other words, God's will is to gather into one joyful reunion and fellowship all the scattered families and races and nations that have ever been. Those who have striven to be part of God's kingdom on earth will be there. By God's grace, you and I will be there. Those we have loved and lost to death will be there. Death does not dissolve love because, as the Scriptures declare, "love is strong as death." So today we light candles to remind ourselves that those who have died still burn brightly to God. The light of Christ they received at baptism is never extinguished. Today we baptize five new Christians to proclaim that these sons and daughters are part of God's family forever. Today we break the bread and pass the cup to receive a foretaste on earth of the great celebration that has already begun in heaven. We believe that the family of God – ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven – gathered together in a great and joyful reunion is not mere utopian thinking, not the projection of our needy imaginations, but the sure and certain promise of God.

How do we know? Well, we point to certain times in history when it seems that God's word spoken through the prophets has been dependable. Today's reading from Isaiah comes from one such time. It began in the 8th century before Jesus. The once great nation of Israel – twelve

tribes strong with David and then Solomon as kings – had divided: ten tribes to the north and two to the south. Then the unthinkable happened. The Assyrians came and wiped out the north. Anyone not killed was absorbed into the pagan culture. The southern kingdom continued on for another hundred years until the Babylonians came, sacked Jerusalem twice, and carried the population off into exile. Families were scattered, people were killed, and the temple was ruined. The Jews were severed from Jerusalem, the city of God. It was spiritual and cultural death, their worst nightmare. Nevertheless, some decades into their exile the prophet Isaiah began to preach good news to the people. They would be going home. They would be going back to Jerusalem where all they had lost would be restored. What would it be like? Isaiah described the moment: *Lift up thine eyes round about, and see: all they gather themselves together, they come to thee: thy sons shall come from afar, and thy daughters shall be nursed at thy side.*

How do you imagine heaven? Should we imagine it at all? I believe I caught a fleeting glimpse of it all those years ago on the front lawn of my childhood home. Who else? Anne Rice is a popular author of gothic fiction who seems to have an off-and-on (but mostly off) relationship with Christianity. Nevertheless, she loves Jesus and in one of her novels describes a vision of heaven. She writes:

I turned to the right and to the left, and then all around me, and in every direction saw these multitudes of beings, wrapped in conversation or dialogue or some sort of interchange, some of them embracing and kissing, and others dancing, and the clusters and groups of them continuing to shift and grow or shrink and spread out. Indeed, the combination of seeming disorder and order was the mystery. This was not chaos. This was not confusion. This was not a din. It seemed the hilarity of a great and final gathering, and by final I mean it seemed a perpetually unfolding resolution of something, a marvel of sustained revelation, a gathering and growing understanding shared by all who participated in it.¹

The vision of an ongoing great and final gathering is compelling, but some will rise with an objection that the promise of God is too much “pie in the sky, bye and bye.” The meek, for example, have been good and ready to inherit the earth, just as Jesus said they would two-thousand years ago. The poor in spirit have been ready for just as long to claim the kingdom of heaven as their own. Those who mourn have always been ready to be comforted, not merely by the passage of time, but by the restoration of their loved ones. Back in the 1960s my family got lucky. My brother returned. My parents got their son back. It doesn’t always turn out that way. Indeed, when we lifted up our eyes this week in New York City, we saw a terrorist attack that claimed many innocent lives, and the violent death of one dear to our Grace Church community. It was hardly a vision of the city of God.

Isaiah himself had his critics. When the returning exiles looked round about at Jerusalem, the city was in ruins and filled with squatters who had taken up residence. Isaiah had preached of a highway in the desert, upon which the ransomed of the Lord would return in multitudes that no one could count. The reality turned out to be far less than they imagined, and the people grumbled. They grumbled as did their forebears in the wilderness during the exodus from Egypt. No doubt Isaiah would have encouraged the people by reminding them of their own history. Yes, the Exodus was hard but God’s word proved faithful and the Jews inhabited the Promised Land. Now the return from exile was hard, but God’s word would prevail again. *Lift up thine eyes round about and see.* “Look around you,” he might have said. “You’re here in Jerusalem. God promised that you would return, and you’re here.” To be sure, the promise wasn’t fully realized, but it was partially fulfilled and pressing onward to its climax.

¹ Anne Rice, *Memnoch the Devil*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1995, p. 165.

So it is that the sojourn in Egypt foretold the exile to Babylon. Likewise the Exodus and crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land prefigured the return to Jerusalem. God's promise pressed forward until the great story being told through Israel came to bear on one particular Jew: Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus taught in parables that God is in the very business of restoring what is lost. Lost sheep, lost coins, and a lost son are restored. In his ministry he restored sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, health to the sick, and even life to the dead. Then Jesus took all of salvation history onto himself, stretching out his arms on the hard wood of the cross, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world. The exile and return foreshadowed Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. His resurrection demonstrates to us that God will keep his promises forever. The promise is still partially fulfilled, but God's word has gone forth from his mouth. It will not return to him empty. The great reunion awaits all of humanity. Nothing can separate us from the love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus – neither death, nor life, nor persecution, nor famine, nor peril, nor sword. Everything we do today is meant to proclaim that God gets his own back.

When we Christians speak of how God is planning to restore us one to another, we use a particular word. The word is resurrection. To invoke the word resurrection means that we are talking about something other than the immortality of the soul. The immortality of the soul is essentially the brainchild of the Greek philosophers. It teaches that the body is merely the outer garment that imprisons the soul, even inhibiting the soul from realizing its full potential and destiny. Death is then seen as a friend because it frees the spiritual, immaterial soul from the shackles of the physical body. Thus, at the time of death the body is scrapped and the soul goes on, perhaps to be absorbed into God as a drop of water is absorbed into the sea. But that's Greek philosophy, not Christianity.

We use the word resurrection, because on Easter Day, Jesus' Spirit didn't go floating off to heaven. Rather, his body participated in the event, even to the point of the wounds of his crucifixion still being visible. Since the first Easter Day theologians have thought through the implications of what resurrection might mean. Generally, they conclude that God's will is to restore our whole selves. God brings us over from death to life with our histories intact. All the "stuff" that makes us who we are comes with us. We will not be indistinguishable drops in the ocean. We will be ourselves, and recognize each other as members of God's family.

I like to think that the columbarium we've recently installed bears witness in a wonderful way to all that we celebrate in the Communion of Saints. To say, as we do in the Apostles' Creed, that we believe in the resurrection of the body is to profess that in God's economy, on the last great day somehow our mortal remains will participate in God's final act of redemption. How this is to be we do not know. Indeed, the molecules that comprise my body today belonged to someone else in ages past. But God's promise, as voiced by Job, is that "even though this body be destroyed, yet in my flesh shall I see God." Therefore, a reverent resting place in a sacred space for our mortal remains bears witness to our reasonable and holy hope of a joyful reunion with those we love. It bears witness to our hope in the resurrection. God promises that his people are a family, so we've even designed the columbarium to look like our historic family pews, right down to the brass name plates, and a pew door itself inscribed with the words of the prophet Isaiah.

God's promise of eternal life is larger than we can imagine. In some ways it is like Grace Church itself. Something I love about Grace Church is that it is much, much bigger inside than the outside suggests it is going to be. The surprise never disappoints. Likewise, God's promises are much bigger on the inside than anything we can ask for or imagine. St. John, in his first letter (3:1-3) would write: *Beloved, we are God's children now* (that's the promised viewed from the outside); *what we will be has not yet been revealed* (that's a glimpse of the promise on the inside).

The late and sometimes radical theologian Edward Schillebeeckx put it this way:

With the resurrection, we are like the child who wants a train from Santa Claus. Before Christmas he dreams of the train; he can already imagine it; he pictures all its details, its color and its form, and how heavy or light it will be. When the day finally dawns and he sees the train that he has really been given, it is quite different from anything he had dreamed of, but so marvelously attractive and overwhelming that he has already forgotten all his earlier dreams and fantasies.²

When the day finally dawns, it will be a joyful reunion indeed: angels, archangels, all the company of heaven, the saints of old, and the saints we have known. It will be a reunion we can scarcely dream of or imagine. Then shall the words of the prophet Isaiah be fulfilled: *Lift up thine eyes round about, and see: all they gather themselves together, they come to thee: thy sons shall come from afar, and thy daughters shall be nursed at thy side.*

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² Edward Schillebeeckx, God Among Us. Crossroad, 1983, p. 138.