**5 Easter**

**April 24, 2016**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

During this Easter season our second lesson each week has been reading from the Book of the Revelation to John. It is the last book of the Bible, and is often misunderstood. It is what is known as apocalyptic literature and comes from a Greek word that means “disclosure,” or “unveiling,” or “revelation.” Apocalyptic literature in both the Old and New Testaments frequently reflects a negative view of this world and expresses the hope for salvation in a new creation or in another life. Its purpose was to comfort and encourage the faithful in difficult times.

The book of the Revelation to John is a fitting close to the Bible for its final chapters depict the consummation toward which the whole biblical message of redemption is focused. It may be described as an inspired picture-book that through an accumulation of magnificent poetic imagery makes a powerful appeal to the reader’s imagination. The book consists of visions that repeat with kaleidoscopic variety the principles of God’s just and merciful governance of the whole creation. These visions contribute to the total impression … they are not to be interpreted literally. To do so would be like trying to appreciate a fine painting by analyzing one brush stroke at a time.

The author of this work is named John, but many scholars doubt that it is the same author as the Gospel of John. The Revelation to John was written after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. during a time of oppression of Christians. This is one of the reasons the message of the book is couched in symbolism … involving numbers, and strange beasts. These mysterious figures and extraordinary metaphors were to prevent the imperial police from recognizing this book as a trumpet call to the persecuted, assuring them that despite the worst that the Roman Empire could do, God reigns supreme, and Christ, who died and is alive forevermore has the power to overcome all evil. Therefore, the Revelation to John ends the book with the prayer, “Come, Lord Jesus.”

The portion of the Book of the Revelation to John that we heard read this morning is in the next to last chapter as the book moves to its pinnacle. These verses are often read at funerals:

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth;*

*for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away,*

…

*He will wipe every tear from their eyes;*

*Death will be no more*

*Mourning and crying and pain will be no more*

*…*

*See, I am making all things new*

Yesterday we held a memorial service for Eve Mary Bates, teZa Lord’s mother. Eve Mary Bates was obviously an amazing person who had a deep sense of individuality that drove her be a journalist in spite of only having an eighth grade education. She was a “Rosie the Riveter” in World War II; a bait girl in her 60’s at a fishing pier in Jacksonville Beach, and an author in her 90’s. She wanted to go to college when she was in her 70’s but had never finished high school. So she earned a GED when she was 72 and then went on to further studies … and that is just a very small glimpse of her life. And the memorial service for Eve Mary bates was itself extraordinary … Mama Blue and Vibe provided the music; Tale-Tellers in costume were in the congregation and read lessons; and the people in the pews participated in a Sanskrit chant before we celebrated the Holy Eucharist … which included a Hindu swami receiving the bread and wine.

Eve Mary Bates lived to be 97 years old. But I was reminded of my brother’s ex-wife whose life was very different, and of a clergy colleague and his wife who I knew from my days in Toledo, Ohio. Both my brother’s ex-wife and the wife of my clergy colleague and friend died at less than half the age of Eve at her death.

A number of years ago Linda Keblesh … the wife of a clergy colleague from Toledo … died after a relatively short but intense battle with a rare form of leukemia. Linda Keblesh was a partner in her husband’s ministry … an extremely devout Christian, and beloved by all the people of St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church in Sylvania, Ohio.

Around the same time as Linda Keblesh’s death my former sister-in-law died after suffering a massive stroke. She and my brother have been divorced for a number of years, but they had always kept in touch, and they had shared the painful experience of the death of their infant daughter.

Joe and Linda Keblesh met at a young age. Joe is an evangelical Christian who talks about “being baptized by the Holy Spirit” and being “born again in Jesus Christ.” Joe and Linda were married with children when Joe experienced his calling into the Episcopal priesthood. The language that Joe used to describe his faith is very different than the language I use … but it is faith in the same God, and the same Lord Jesus Christ. Joe and I stood on opposite sides of the debate within the Episcopal Church on issues of human sexuality, yet we did so with a deep respect for each other’s ministry, and we looked for common ground whenever we could. So Caren and I stood with Joe and Linda Keblesh in front of the Muslim school in Toledo following 9/11 as a show of our unity against the hateful bigotry that was being displayed by some who drove by the school shouting obscenities and throwing trash at the students. We shared dinner with Joe and Linda on a number of occasions and agreed to disagree on some things, and then found room for our conversation to move to sharing things in common.

During Linda’s illness Joe would keep his friends and parishioners abreast of developments through the internet. Joe would post regular notices but most of it was bad news, and Joe’s postings became more and more desperate as the weeks went on. Linda had to be moved between hospitals in Toledo and Cleveland. A bone marrow transplant was proposed; she endured chemotherapy; and she suffered from chronic infections. Joe would write about Linda’s condition … and the state of his soul … late at night and into the early morning hours. When the end came for Linda she was surrounded by her loving family. Linda’s funeral was officiated by two bishops, with a score of Joe’s brother and sister clergy in attendance, and the church was filled beyond capacity.

The story of my brother’s ex-wife stands in stark contrast to Linda Keblesh. Patty Kirby was my brother’s second wife … he is now in his third marriage. Although my brother Kirk and Patty Kirby were deeply in love at one time, with all the hopes and dreams of any couple, things never went as planned. Patty lost her job, and Kirk’s business went bust. Then, after several years of trying to get pregnant, Patty and Kirk had a daughter born prematurely … and she lived for only a few days. Kirk and I buried the baby in a tiny casket … Patty was too heartbroken to attend. Patty never really recovered from that, and she and Kirk were divorced within a year. Alcohol became her drug of choice, and a few weeks before her death a friend found her living in filth and covered with bruises from falling down. Then she had a massive stroke and her death followed a couple of days later. Kirk and several friends buried Patty’s ashes alone in the cemetery … Patty’s only living relative was her 84-year-old widowed mother who is suffering from dementia.

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*…*

*See, I am making all things new*

Fr. Joe Keblesh lost his beloved wife Linda, and my brother Kirk lost his second wife Patty. Joe was in terrible grief, but it was no less than my brother Kirk’s. And their grief was no more or less than the grief that any of you have faced in your own lives when you have lost someone very dear to you. There are those beloved souls who have been taken from us, and the pain is intense. However, there is sometimes a death that happens before a person physically dies. There are also those lost souls, whose lives might have been different, and although they are still physically alive, they leave with lots of unfinished business … and the pain is still there for those left behind. Patty experienced “soul loss” with the death of her premature daughter … and she never was able to regain her spirit.

Yet even in this small community of St. Cyprian’s I know that many of you know friends, or even family members, who have also experienced “soul loss.” Whatever the original cause of “soul loss” for some people it may now be expressed by addiction to alcohol or drugs … or maybe the “soul loss” is expressed through a bad choice that led to incarceration … or a perhaps it is expressed by a self-destructive pattern of living that keeps repeating itself. And although these friends and family members may still be breathing with blood coursing through their veins we grieve the loss of their lives.

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*…*

*See, I am making all things new*

This is the season of the Resurrection. If it means anything at all it means that there is life after death. That there is, indeed, a new heaven and a new earth when the first earth has passed away. See, I am making all things new.

For Fr. Joe his strong faith upheld him in his grief … and, although he still mourns, his tears continue to be wiped away. For my brother Kirk time has healed his grief as well … and I believe that God was working through that time … even if Kirk does not call upon God to be with him.

For us, in this small community of faith of St. Cyprian’s … we are not immune to the grief this world brings. However, it is the faith that we proclaim, that, even in our darkest moments, can strengthen our spirit. This season of the Resurrection promises life beyond death … and I’m not just talking about a person’s soul going to heaven. There is life beyond death for us who are left behind … or perhaps even living with those who have lost their souls and are dead to this world. There is a new heaven and a new earth when the old heaven and old earth pass away. Indeed, all things are made new.

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth;*

*for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away,*

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Amen.