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Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
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In today's Sunday Review in the New York Times there is an article about death, or more precisely how does medical science decide exactly when death occurs. Not surprisingly the experts do not agree. In today's second reading St. Paul would have reflect not just on the fact of death, but on the meaning of death, and on how we deal with our own mortality. St. Paul writes to Christians living in first century Corinth and to us, "If Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some among you say there is no resurrection of the dead?...if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless: you are still in your sins....If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are the most pitiable people of all." Is there a dimension of existence beyond the limits of sense and sight and touch and sound, a life beyond that which we experience now? And does the fact of Christ's resurrection and the promise of our having a part in it make a difference in how we live right now? So that it's not simply a matter of "pie in the sky when you die by and by? Knowing how a story ends can, at times, help us appreciate the details as the story is being told, and this can be just as true with the story of our lives.

St. Paul claims that if there be no resurrection of the dead we are "still in our sins." What he means is that if we think death is the end of everything, then we are we are already conditioned by that belief. The specter of death's inevitability touches us even now to the degree that we are paralyzed by our fears and anxieties. Then we are forever on the defensive, distrustful of what might always happen, because we are convinced that life itself is not to be trusted. Then we may be inclined to hold back from life or retreat in isolation. We develop strategies of self-protection, rather than engage life with openness and trust. If I am convinced that in the end I am bound to lose everything, then all along the way, I'll try to grab whatever I can to make the best of it. We are caught up, wrapped up in ourselves, estranged from God. In short, as St. Paul writes, "we are still in my sins."

What can we say about a life beyond the grave? Shakespeare describes it as "that undiscovered country from which no one has ever returned." Is it like describing a color we've never seen? The American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson answers the question by saying, "Because of the beauty I have seen, I trust the Creator for what I have not seen." He means that the complexity, the wonder, the magnificence of all that I see around me can give me the confidence that the One who made all this can provide for an existence beyond what my limited human imagination can come up with. I don't have to know precisely what it is in order to be confident that there is this

something more.

Usually we are accustomed to think of life and death as two separate and distinct realities, but in the vision Jesus gives us they are joined together like two sides of a coin. In fact, life and death are intermingled, so that things are not as they appear to be. In St. John's Gospel Jesus gives the example of a seed that, when it is buried in the ground, has all the appearances of death, disintegration and decay. But at the same moment as it appears to be dying, life is emerging from the seed in the form of tiny roots that, when watered by the rains and nurtured by the soil, will produce the stalk of wheat. Jesus provides this parable as a metaphor for His own death and resurrection. This parable can be taken as a sort of lens through which we look at life, providing us with clearer vision, so that the events of our lives are not just brute, senseless facts, but can even now be given some coherence and meaning. The death and resurrection of Jesus announces to us that He through Whom the universe was created allows Himself to be done in by it, yet is not overcome by it. That is the essential mystery that has to be translated into the conduct of our everyday lives. In the person of Jesus Christ, God breaks in delivering the "good news" that death need not be viewed as final extinction, as annihilation, as the ultimate end, but as a beginning.

If that be true, the answer to living is found not by trying to escape from what we might call the human condition by means of all the strategies we can devise to soften life's pain and the ease its burdens, but by opening ourselves more genuinely to everyday experiences. It is by dealing with what life throws at us, rather than trying to turn away and deny the reality of what is actually happening. It is by ceasing to blame others for what is essentially my own responsibility. It is by ceasing to rage in anger or wallow in despair. It is by refusing to play the role of victim. It is by ceasing to stall for time, hoping magically that things will get better by themselves.

If change be the one constant of life, faith in Christ's resurrection bears very closely and how I deal with those situations in which I am not in control of my destiny. George Bernard Shaw once wrote, "There are two great tragedies in life: one is not to get what you always longed for; the other is to get it." St. Teresa of Avila put another way, "Answered prayers are more dangerous unanswered prayers." Why is it that success can be as difficult to deal with as defeat? because things are so very different now. Why is it that when I get what I want, it's often not what I thought I wanted? Why is that the people who after a long struggle to achieve a measure of material success for their loved ones, come to find themselves estranged from those very same people? Why is it that an individual who finally sees an alcoholic spouse on the road to recovery, paradoxically see the marriage falling apart rather than strengthened. How is

it that a young couple recently married, very much in love, still have a hard time giving up their privacy, their independence, their autonomy. Because things are so very different now.

Change, whether it be freely chosen or something forced upon us, always partakes to some degree of the experience of what death is all about. Dostoyevsky was correct when he said that, "What people fear most is taking a new step, uttering a new word." It is the anxiety, the dislocation, the abandonment of comfortable routines, that change forces us to confront. Change partakes of the taste of death, for change carries with it a fear of the unknown, a sense of being dispossessed of what we depended upon for our security and safety. No wonder change is something that is difficult to deal with. Yet, if I am convinced that life is ultimately not to be feared, then I can take steps into the unknown. I can leave behind the security of what I have grown familiar with, trusting that what I will discover will not do me in finally and irrevocably. I can trust that what I may have at first thought was the collapse, the breakdown of all my hopes and dreams, can be the breakthrough to something better, a path I would never have traveled left simply to my own fears and anxieties.

So, poised on the precipice, confronted with the choice, looking into an unknown future, perhaps imagining the worst possible scenario that might befall me, what do I do? Do I try to shield myself by retreating to what is most familiar, to patterns of behavior that may have served me well in the past, but won't serve me any longer? Do I grab onto something, some substance, some person, some behavior, that will immunize me from the discomfort involved in this new situation? Or do I simply take that next step, speak that new word, and open myself up to what follows?

If I can trust in the life which is before me because I believe that at its core is a loving, beneficent God, then I can engage it with all its non-sense, its absurdities, its injustices, because I believe that every step along the way participates in that joyous outcome that is to be revealed in the end. Jesus teaches us that life is to be received with an open hand, not a clenched fist. Yet, too often we go through life like some white-knuckler on a bumpy airplane flight, holding on to all the props we have accumulated to give us a sense of safety. In 12-Step programs, those in recovery, those who have been to hell and back, have a little phrase that can be helpful to all of us, "Let go, and let God."

When I "let go," I am learning to die (death spelled with a small "d"); I learn to let go of what can't be held onto anyway; I learn to surrender to what can't be otherwise; I permit myself to be open to what is perhaps terrifyingly new. So, in the end, in the final "letting go," death spelled with a capital "D." sheds its light on every

step along the way, and with that light comes the ability to make the journey with trust, courage and faith. If I have learned to die many times in the course of my lifetime, if I have learned to engage what life throws at me and discovered that my little world did not cave in upon me, then I have experienced already a glimpse of what resurrection is all about. If I have abandoned the expectation of being able to control my destiny, which is the false promise that a consumer society is constantly trying to sell us, then I can know even now in some partial but real way the triumph offered in Christ's resurrection. Then I can approach death with a measure of hope based upon experience, the actual experience of living in the manner of Jesus. If I allow myself to be transformed by those experiences, I can be open to that final transformation. Then, death is not the end but a beginning.

In a few moments will take part in the Eucharist, the pledge given to us by Jesus of that final transformation. And the Eucharist itself bears the signs of transformation: ground wheat that becomes bread, crushed grapes that become wine, each becoming the means of Christ transforming presence. May our sharing in this Eucharist enable us to live the mystery we celebrate.