

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 6th Sunday of Easter, May 26, 2019, Memorial Day Weekend.

Memorial Day is a time to remember with gratitude those who have given their lives while serving their country. One of the traditional activities on this weekend is to visit military cemeteries and other resting places, including memorial gardens. Some of these visits are personal. Others are public. Whether it's one family at a time or a whole nation giving thanks, this morning's passage from Revelation (**Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5**) applies.

What survivors want and need is assurance that their loved one, at a minimum, is free of pain, and, at a maximum, is in God's loving care. Such an environment is described in these verses:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more.

Can you imagine visiting a cemetery without this or some comparable assurance that those no longer with us are with a loving God? Can you imagine not being able to utter these familiar words: "Give us faith to see in death the gate of eternal life, so that in quiet confidence we may continue our course on earth, until, by your call, we are reunited with those who have gone before."

Some will call this "wishful thinking." You and I understand this optimism as "such good things as surpass our understanding." There's a difference, isn't there?

During this post-Easter season, we read regularly from the Acts of the Apostles. Who were these men and women? Who are they today? We are they, aren't we? In the words from this morning's lesson from Acts (**Acts 16:9-15**) we are "convinced that God has called us to proclaim the good news."

And where will this proclamation take place? Wherever we are, that's where. It's the "where" that dominates the Book of Acts. This morning's passage for example, lists a bunch of cities where Paul visits: Troas, Samothrace, Neapolis and Philippi. He's all over the Mediterranean. And wherever he goes, he proclaims, not in word only, but through actions such as prayer and baptism and hospitality.

In short, Paul is a proclaimer of action. The grateful one who is saved now helping to save others. An early version of "pay it forward."

In today's gospel (**John 14:23-29**), the Risen Christ looks forward as well. In time, he announces, he must return to His Father. But, not to worry, He says, an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, will be with us for ever. "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

Those we remember on this Memorial Day, those whose graves we visit, those for whom prayers are offered, those who made a positive difference by their service, they would be urging us to stay strong, not only in self-defense, but in faith. The kind of faith expressed in this morning's psalm (**Psalms 67**). Perhaps not as well known as the 23rd Psalm, but equally powerful in its conviction. "May God give us his blessing, and may all the ends of the earth stand in awe of him."

No one wants Peace more than those who fight to preserve the Peace. No one wants military cemeteries to be unnecessary more than those who are interred there and their families.

We live in a Fallen World, in which we have a choice. We can contribute to the Fall through our selfishness, or we can contribute to the Rise through sacrifice of all sorts. The One we worship set the bar high in terms of sacrifice. But, in turn, that sacrifice brought us a victory unmatched. You and I are called to proclaim both the sacrifice and the victory, and to make that proclamation in both word and deed.

To be sure, there are battles ahead between Good and Evil. It has always been so and will always be. And sometimes people decide which army to join based on which army they believe will prevail. Well, we are part of a tradition that is absolutely confident that God will prevail. That conclusion is what drives us and sustains us. The hymn "My Faith Looks Up to Thee" uses this phrase: "May thy

rich grace impart strength in my fainting heart, my zeal inspire.” Here’s a bumper sticker for us: “Feel the Zeal.”

We read and reread the reports from the spiritual battlefield, as captured in Scripture. The Book of Acts carries many of these reports, but so do our individual lives. We are compiling a record as we speak. With God’s help and with the help of one another, we are giving credence to the relationship of sacrifice and victory. We can see the power of this relationship when we visit a cemetery, and we can see its power when we visit an altar.

It is not an accident that on the grounds of every military cemetery there is a chapel. It is also not an accident that churches, including this one, routinely honor those who have served their country and died doing so. There is an unbreakable bond.

This bond is expressed in our final hymn today: “Almighty Father, strong to save.” Right now, I invite you to take a look at **Hymn 579**. I’ll give you a few seconds to find the page. Hymn 579.

Note that there are four stanzas. The first three end with concern for those in peril: “on the sea,” “on the land,” and “in the air.” These are clearly references to those in the various services. But notice the ending of stanza four: “thus evermore shall rise to thee glad praise from space, air, land, and sea.”

Not just prayers for those who serve, but praise offered up to the One who Saves. Not directed at, but offered to. And whose praise might that be that we are offering? It is our praise, isn’t it? It’s the praise of faith.

The “unbreakable bond” involves two parties: those risking and giving their lives in defense of freedom, and those offering thanksgiving for those risking and giving.

And where do those two forces regularly meet? At altars all over the world, some in war zones and some in less stressful settings. Yes, there is a bond between service and thanksgiving for service. We exercise this bond especially over Memorial Day Weekend.

National service occurs in all sorts of ways. Military service is one way. Faith in God is another. So, as we acknowledge those who have died in service to our country, let us remember that thanksgiving and praise – our Faith, if you will – is also vital to a Great Society. Never underestimate what your praise, our praise, can contribute.

In closing, here is a prayer offered often by military chaplains. It is entitled “Thanksgiving for comrades.” The prayer speaks to the relationship of military service and faith service.

Dear Lord, we give thanks for the courage of our brothers and sisters in arms. For the strength of their backs and their wills. For their grit and their trust. For their spirit and determination. For their sense and their skill. May we be to them as good a comrade as they have been to us, and may your strong arm, O Lord, defend them in this life and the next.

Amen.