

Acts 7:55-60  
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16  
1 Peter 2:2-10  
JOHN 14:1-14

*Because of the hope we have in us, therefore...*

For the last week it has really felt like spring. We have had glorious sunshine, increasing warmth, flowers and trees blooming – and yes, allergies. With that exception, if you're anything like me, days like the ones we've recently had are "it's great to be alive" weather.

Even more important, we Christians are continuing to celebrate the glory of Easter Season: the Great Fifty Days in which we let soak into our minds and spirits anew how much Christ's death and resurrection changes things. Because of Good Friday, we have atonement for our sins, forgiveness and the offer of a fresh start here and now. Because of Easter, we can *live* unafraid of death, confident that Christ is victorious over death. We can be filled with joy in the strength and guidance Christ offers us in our lives here and now, in the new life he offers to all whom he calls to join him in heaven after their deaths, *and* in our ultimate hope for the complete transformation of the world when Christ returns and ushers in the Kingdom of God.

*Therefore*, we should not live our lives in fear of death. Sure, there are plenty of *ways* I might die which scare me, but I believe that death itself is different. Christ stands at the other side of death.

Of course, heaven is *not* automatic for anyone who calls him or herself a Christian. Jesus clearly says, "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but those who do the will of my Father." Likewise, not everyone who is not baptized is automatically excluded: *God* is in charge of salvation, not the church.

Naturally, people sometimes want details, and American pop culture has given us a flood of sometimes saccharine or maudlin images of heaven. *Jesus doesn't give us any more details than we need.* In today's Gospel (which is often read at funerals or memorial services in the Episcopal Church, including my father's recent one), Jesus basically says of heaven, "There's room" and "I'm in charge."

What else do we need to know? If we know and trust Christ, we don't try to plug the route to heaven into a Mapquest search or into a GPS. If we know and trust Christ, we don't need to see photos or room layouts of the "many dwelling places" in his father's house. (After all, if a dear, trusted and long-time friend of yours who's house you had never visited invited you for the weekend, would you demand pictures and an hour-by-hour itinerary before you accepted, or would you trust and delight in being in the company of your friend?)

If we have a personal relationship with Christ through personal prayer, listening to his guidance and experiencing him in the Bible, in the sacraments, in the best behaviors of people within the Christian community and in the people we can serve, then

all we need to know is his words: “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.” If we seek that personal relationship with Christ, then “Seek and you shall find.”

Looking ahead with hope for life after life does not mean being morbid or not enjoying this present life. Far from it! On the contrary, it means rejoicing in what we can do to maximize our God-given potential for good in this world, savoring every moment of time with those we love, taking care of our health and wellbeing and that of others and of the world.

**AND** – looking ahead with hope **also** means **not** being in denial of our own mortality, but recognizing it and, **therefore making plans**, while healthy and of sound mind, for the issues which will inevitably arise with our dying and death.

Many or most of us will at some point face critical, life-threatening or life-ending illnesses. That’s reality. *Therefore*, each of us needs to ask ourselves these questions: “Who is the person I want to make care decisions for me when I can’t?” “What kinds of medical treatment do I want or don’t want?” “How comfortable do I want to be?” “How do I want people to treat me?” and finally, “What do I want my loved ones to know?”

Either your will will be done **or** someone else’s will will be done. If the “somebody else’s” doesn’t know your wishes, they are going to have to guess - *or* impose their *own* wishes on you. *Therefore*, the church has this booklet, “Five Wishes”, available on the table in the Welcoming Area. If you’re an adult of whatever age and you haven’t thought about these things, please pick one up.

Second, when we die, we will leave our bodies behind. Whatever heaven is like, it doesn’t involve our present, physical bodies being transported into space. They stay here. Many of us currently have most or all of our organs working reasonably well. And many of us will ultimately die with the ability to give life and health to others with one or more of our organs. The church has no moral or spiritual objection to organ donation but, in fact, supports it.

But – for an adult to be an organ donor, you have to sign up ahead of time.

Now, to all of those statements, someone could well say, “Duh.” They’re pretty obvious. How about these statements: Nationwide, over 80,000 people are waiting for life-saving organ transplants, including 2,300 here in New Jersey. Every 13 minutes, another name is added to the national transplant waiting list. Each day, 17 people die while waiting.

Those people die because not enough people sign up ahead of time to be organ donors. Otherwise, they would live.

So, we can decide to have all our organs be cremated, or go into a casket and rot – or we can save up to eight lives, *each* of us, by being organ donors.

Think about it, join me. Please. Literature is on the table in the Welcoming Area.

Finally, in the words of 1 Timothy 6:7, “We brought nothing into this world...we can take nothing out of it.”

That includes, folks, our 401-Ks, life insurance proceeds, proceeds from a home sale, and that winning mega-millions ticket you put in a secret place where no one will find it except, perhaps, after the deadline.

*Heaven has been fully funded by Someone Else.* It is pre-paid. And for those who don't go to heaven, well, they can't take their money with them either, and that'll be the least of their problems.

Nonetheless, an astonishing number of people, including great numbers of Christians, die without wills. I recommend that you die without a will if you:

- ✦ have children under the age of 18 and you really don't care at all who, even a stranger, becomes their guardians since, after all, the judge who will make this decision will have no clue about who you do want; and/or
- ✦ want to make whoever will be stuck settling your affairs have to go through as much "red tape" as possible with governmental bureaucracies because you really like anonymous bureaucrats more than those who are nearest and dearest to you.

If you haven't written a will with the help of an attorney *and* signed it and had it witnessed, what I just described is what you *have* done. Because if you haven't written a will, the State of New Jersey has written one for you, and guess who's in charge. Is *that* what you want?

Now, we not only need to *write* wills, we need to think carefully, preferably when we're healthy and calm, about all the possibilities, including guardianship of minor children – and *ask* the prospective guardians or back-ups first. Think carefully about who to ask. Then, once you've decided, **finalize** the will.

Sadly, sometimes people wait until literally the last minute, and decisions are made under great pressure which might have been made differently. One parishioner shared this story with me last week and explicitly authorized me to excerpt it, anonymously, for this sermon.

The parishioner's sister had a five year-old son. She, his mother, was dying of cancer. The parishioner picks up the story: "The lawyer arrived about 2 p.m. and took me and my sister (both of whom had little day-to-day contact with her [the sister who was dying] and asked if we thought our sister was 'lucid enough to sign her (last prepared) will.' We felt dumbfounded and shocked. We tried unsuccessfully to get our oldest sister there because she had actually talked with her most recently regarding guardian/adoption issues. We had never seen the will and were in no shape to digest it. We felt trapped but wanted a will in place. WE LITERALLY HAD TO HOLD MY DYING SISTER UP AND HELP HER MAKE AN "X" TO FINALIZE THE WILL. [All caps in the original e-mail to me.] This was the most heart-wrenching experience I hope I have to face. My sister died two hours later... The bottom line is, making up a will BEFORE it is 'needed' is the best situation." The parishioner added that the lawyer said years later her sister was unsure that her choice of guardian was the wisest.

Another parishioner also asked to me share this painful vignette with you today. When her sister was dying, she got married and made her new husband the beneficiary of

her life insurance. She died two weeks after the wedding. Months after her death he gave her kids to this parishioner to raise and left – but kept all the life insurance money.

Deacon Barbara shared this story with me about the importance of getting a will *updated*. “About six weeks ago, I received a call that a friend from the county fair had died. When I attended a service for her, I learned the following. She had never updated her will or representatives and everyone had died. Therefore, her body was in a morgue until a court could decide. It took six weeks for her to be buried. No one was allowed to claim her body, not her church or her friends. Even if they would pay all the bills. She was not cremated as she had wished, because it wasn’t written down. Moral: keep things updated. If you family travels together, make sure your will has alternative beneficiaries. Talk to people, put your wishes in writing.”

I don’t know how I can make my point more clearly. Think about what you want, talk to people, get a lawyer, talk with your attorney about all the possible contingencies, write it all down, sign it.

Now, enough with the horror stories. Think about the *good* you can do through a will – not only providing carefully and effectively for those you love, reducing their hassles after your death, and resting easier yourself now, you can also provide, through charitable bequests, for those charities which are near and dear to you. Your generosity can last longer than your lifetime.

Speaking personally, I am confident that Elda and Tom will do fine on 90% of what money I will leave behind, whenever that is, so I am tithing my estate to charity. And St. Barnabas is at the top of my personal list.

If you wish to include one or more charities in your will, you can do so. If you are anxious about leaving a set amount, leave a percentage, thus ensuring that your heirs will get the rest. If you are over 55 years old now, would like to get a charitable tax deduction *now*, would like to receive a guaranteed income for life and then have the gift itself go to charity when you die, look into a charitable gift annuity.

There is a brochure in every service leaflet about wills. Please take it home and read it – or if you’ve already done everything I suggest, give it to someone you care about. There are also brochures about charitable gift annuities, and more copies of the brochure about wills, on the table in the Welcoming Area. If you would like to talk to me about including the church in your estate planning, please do so before you finalize things. Sometimes people make arrangements which do not reflect their intent simply because they don’t talk to the church first.

In conclusion, it’s Easter. And whatever season of the year it is, it’s always Easter. *Therefore*, we can live in hope, in the light of that all-powerful dawn. Therefore, we can look Death in the eye, and Death will blink. Therefore, we can make thoughtful, considered and wise decisions which can bless others in ways beyond what we can foresee. So let’s make those decisions.

**The Rev. Francis A. Hubbard**

St. Barnabas Episcopal Church  
Monmouth Junction, NJ