

The Rev. Dayle Casey
St. John's Cathedral
Denver, Colorado
January 7, 2023

Requiem for Edward J. Morgan, Priest
May 5, 1944 — December 13, 2022
Isaiah 25:6-9
Revelation 7:9-17
John 11:21-27

Sometimes, in the midst of the routines of life, we are lulled into thinking that the world is stable. “Terra Firma,” we call the earth fondly. The sun rises and sets each day, we are off to work at eight o’clock and home by five-thirty, tee times at the club are reliable, the bridge group gets together without fail every Tuesday, paychecks arrive on time and all the bills get paid. Most of the time.

But now and then we are brought back to reality — back to the truth, back to the realization that the world is *not* stable, back to an awareness that life, from birth to death and beyond, is a mysterious *journey*, a holy gift from God, not a right or entitlement. And back to the realization that we are not in charge.

A child is brought low with an illness. A close friend moves to another part of the country. A loved one leaves home. Christmas happens, and the bills *don't* get paid. The quantum world refuses to behave itself. The scientists remind us that the earth’s orbit is not so stable after all and that we live on the outer crust of a very small planet, just a blip in space actually — a tiny, wobbling spaceship that is spinning around an expanding universe with a cargo of molten lava at God knows what speed, which, because of entropy, is steadily decaying into a state of chaos.

Ed Morgan dies, and we find ourselves in that small boat with Jesus, being thrown around by high winds and waves on a dark and stormy night on the Sea of Galilee. And, like the disciples, we are made aware once again that death is the inevitable consequence of the gift of mortal life. And with this truth comes the realization that we need something more than *this* world to hold on to. “We’re going to drown! Lord, save us!” we cry, while Jesus sleeps, at peace in the midst of the storm.¹

Ed and I first got to know each other in 1981 during his second year at Nashotah House. I had been invited to teach the course in homiletics that year, and Ed was a student in the class. I learned a lot from Ed that year. I learned that Ed seriously valued preaching as an important part of a parish priest’s ministry. I learned that he believed that preaching must be more than a few quick reflections on the Gospel reading for the week. I learned from Ed that, if a preacher takes priestly ministry seriously, he or she

¹ Matthew 8:23-27; Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25

will heed the exhortation mounted on the pulpit at St. Paul's Cathedral in London. "Sir, we would see Jesus," it reads. And that means not just preaching sweet Jesus the Good Shepherd and attractive Savior, but also preaching Jesus the *prophet*, the one who calls us to welcome the poor and the alien among us, to befriend and comfort the lonely, to throw the moneychangers out of the Temple, to talk turkey to those in power, and to take up our own crosses and follow Jesus to Calvary, because, as Bonhoeffer reminds us, God's grace is free, but it's certainly not cheap. No picking and choosing the Jesus we prefer to the Jesus of the Gospels!

I learned also, however, that Ed agreed with George Herbert — that under *usual* circumstances a sermon should not exceed one hour. *Today* is not a usual circumstance.

I'm not sure what *Ed* learned from *me* that year except that preaching is not so much about theology as it is about relating God's promise to *real* daily life in the *real* unstable daily world and that, therefore, the primary sources for preparing a sermon are the Bible and the daily newspaper, mixed in with the preacher's own experience and flavored, perhaps, with a sprinkling of insights from thoughtful people like Frederick Buechner.

Nineteen-eighty-one was also the year I first visited Haiti, joining a medical mission from the Diocese of Milwaukee to St. Peter's Church in Mirabalais, where the rector was Father Fritz Lafontant. I did the same for several years. Then, after Ed had graduated and returned to Colorado, he and I went together on the Milwaukee trips, and in 1989, together with Octave Lafontant and some of you here today, we founded St. Paul's parish in Petit-Trou de Nippes in partnership with our parishes in Colorado. It is a partnership, now renamed Locally Haiti, that continues to this day under the capable leadership of Wynn Walent.

Ed and I did not begin that work with the idea of solving Haiti's problems. We knew, as Mother Teresa once said, that God does not call us to be successful, but to be faithful. So being faithful in two ways is what we wanted to be. First, we wanted to be faithfully *present* to brothers and sisters in Haiti who could use some help from their more fortunate friends in the United States. Second, we hoped to provide opportunities for our parishes in Colorado, which run the risk of parochialism in every sense of the word, to see that there is indeed life outside Estes Park and the Broadmoor and that a catholic Church calls us to be aware of and available to that larger world.

The challenge of preaching God's good news to worlds as different and far apart as Haiti and Colorado came into clear focus to me when Ed said something one day as the two of us were driving out of Port-au-Prince toward Petit-Trou. We were just on the

southwestern edge of the city, comfortable in our cool air-conditioned SUV. We were passing the huge smoking city garbage dump on our right where two young boys were scavenging for their lunch. At the same time a truck was approaching us with its name boldly printed on the front of its bed. "Golgotha," it read. And pointing to the dump and the boys, Ed turned to me and said, "That's where we crucified Jesus, on the garbage dump outside the city where the unclean live."

Ed went on to preach a sermon on that truth at St. Bartholomew's, a sermon I later preached myself, word for word with Ed's permission, at the Chapel of Our Saviour. I was sure to let everyone know that it was Ed's sermon, of course, not mine, because Ed's sermon expressed the truth about Jesus at Golgotha, both past and present, better than I could think to do myself. After all, there's only one Original: God. The rest of us simply pass on news we've received.

The news Ed was most fond of passing on was what he understood to be the core of Jesus' own life and teaching — namely, living with faith in God, trusting God's grace.

But Ed's voice in this world is now silenced. The Ed we have known and loved — Ed the husband of Sara, Ed the father of Krista and Andy, Ed the grandfather of six, Ed the priest, friend, and colleague of many — Ed dies at age seventy-eight, and we are reminded once again of the words of the psalmist:²

[That] *the span of our life is seventy years,
perhaps in strength even eighty;
at their best our years are but toil and sorrow,
for they pass away quickly and we are gone....*

*...So teach us to number our days
that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.*

Ed dies, and the world we have known is turned upside down and inside out and we need something or someone reliable to hold on to. And in the midst of the storm we cry out, "Master, we are sinking! Don't you care if we die?" Our distress is like that of Mary Magdalene after the death of Jesus. "They have taken my Lord away," Mary wept. "And I don't know where to find him! Where have they taken him?" And Jesus responds again, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?"

² Psalm 90:10-12

Which brings me to the Gospel question for today. Why was Mary Magdalene the first to see the *risen* Jesus? Why wasn't it one of the twelve disciples?

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all tell it this way, either, as John reports, that it was Mary Magdalene alone to whom Jesus appeared at the tomb, or, as the other evangelists say, that Mary was the first among several women who found the tomb empty and then reported the Easter news to the disciples.

The answer is obvious. The women were *there* to be appeared *to*, and the men were not. The disciples had run away! The men were in hiding, fearful that they might be the next to be crucified. But unlike the men, Mary, in her faithfulness, had followed Jesus all the way to the Cross, there to share his suffering as Jesus had shared hers regardless of circumstance. She and the other women had risked going to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body so that it would be properly prepared for burial, watching and waiting upon Jesus even in his death, just as they had comforted him and loved him all those years on the road.

So the Easter question turns a bit. It turns from "Why did the risen Christ appear first to Mary Magdalene?" to "Why were Mary Magdalene and the other women there to be appeared *to*, while the men were not?" Mary was the first to meet the risen Jesus simply because *she* was present to *him*. She was at the tomb because she had loved Jesus. And now, she thought, she had lost the person who had loved *her*. And she was deep in grief! "Who will I hold on to now?" she wondered. And that's when Jesus spoke to her, calling her by name. "Mary," he said.

And when the risen Jesus called Mary by name, she was made aware that the psalmist overlooked a few things. Our span of life is *more* than toil and sorrow. Life is also faith and hope and love and joy as well. And faithfulness and gratitude.

Sometimes we forget about the importance of a faithful presence. A person's presence is as mysterious and elusive to us human beings as is Y-H-W-H at the burning bush. Did you notice that it was precisely when Mary Magdalene was wondering where Jesus' dead body *was* that she was surprised by Jesus himself? Maybe Jesus doesn't appear until we call on him. That's what we do at the Eucharist — isn't it? — where, when we call upon Jesus, we are assured of Jesus' presence. Is *Jesus* here with us today? Is Ed? It is, after all, precisely *because* of Ed and Jesus that *we* are here today, searching for them the way Mary was searching for Jesus at his tomb.

The women at Jesus' tomb were *there*, present, offering love and care to the one they loved even after he had died, and Jesus came among them. And the turbulent sea

of Good Friday and Holy Saturday calmed down when Jesus offered the women faith and life once again on Easter morning, while the disciples, not prepared to be surprised, thought the women's report was just so much women's nonsense.

And that brings us back to *today*, back to *us* here this morning. Ed dies, and we — like Mary Magdalene — we find ourselves on a stormy sea on the outer crust of a small spacecraft, a mere speck in space, on a fragile planet in the midst of a turbulent, unstable universe. Even our cities and neighborhoods are unstable. So what or who will we hold on to now?

These bodily tents we inhabit, St. Paul reminds us — they pass away. But faith, hope, and love — these three abide. So hold on to the constants. Hold on to God as Jesus did. Hold on with faith, and hope, and love.

We will miss Ed's faithful, loving, physical presence among us here, we will miss his powerful sense of humor, but we need not miss the way Ed reflected God among us through the witness he left us, the way Ed loved and the way he preached and *lived* faith in God's grace. None of us has a clue where the *person* has gone when the earthly tent he inhabits dies, but the person's faith and love and hope do not pass away with the death of the body.

For all his mortal years Ed's love and faith — his presence, his hope, his laughter, his sowing and watering — were *here* for us. And they remain here. So hold on to those. Remember Ed's presence always, and be grateful for it. Above all, be grateful. Be grateful for the gift. Shed tears because Ed's physical body has returned to the dust, but also smile because God gave him to us for a time. And remember to thank God for his gift of Ed to us.

And, finally, remember the strength of your *own* faith, Pattern it after the faith of Jesus himself. We are born into this world without so much as God's asking our permission, and we *live* by faith, not by sight, all the way from birth to death and beyond. Everything we do in this world is by faith, even dying. As Kierkegaard reminds us, faith is what sees best in the dark. In the beginning it was by faith that God risked creating Adam and Eve. It is by faith that the children of Adam and Eve have children themselves, and it is by faith that the child takes her first step. By faith we go to sleep at night. It is by faith that we submit to anesthesia and to the surgeon's knife. It is by faith that we risk driving the roads to DIA and by faith that we board an airplane for Paris.

Faith provides the confidence we need to move from the present into the future. Faith is what leads one to tell another that she loves him in the hope that her trust will not be rejected. Faith is what leads us to leave home as young adults, risking to make a home of our own. It is by faith in the future that we start a new business and build schools for our children and their future. It is by faith that we *die*. And, finally, it is by faith in the promise of God that we are delivered by God into the world to come.

Faith is not a five-letter word in the Bible. Like faith's sisters hope and love, faith is an enduring reality not discerned by the optic nerve but known by the heart and the soul as the energy of life. That's why God promises to be with us always. So that we might *live*, by faith.

Speaking about this mysterious journey on earth God has sent us on, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin suggests that we human beings fall into the habit of getting things backwards. "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience," Chardin insists. "We are *spiritual* beings having a *human* experience." We are, in other words, essentially faith, hope, and love, *spiritual* realities which *abide*, living temporarily in these bodily tents, which do not. I think Ed laughed so much because of the irony of us spiritual beings getting things back to front and front to back here on earth.

We don't know what death is anymore that we know what Einstein's space-time is or who Y-H-W-H is. We just know that, like our journey on earth through space and time, death is a journey we take on faith. Like that earlier journey we took from slavery into freedom, we take the journey into the Promised Land with God's promise in our pockets. And anyone who has traveled with Ed knows that he needs to be prepared to laugh on the journey, because journeys usually hold surprises.

And the ultimate surprise of God's promise is that we will laugh again. Ed laughed because he knew that laughter is God's favorite sound. You didn't know that? It's right there in the Bible. Laughter is why God told Sarah, at age ninety, that she was going to have a baby. God wanted to hear Sarah laugh. And Sarah did laugh. She laughed, as Frederick Buechner put it, at the absurdity of God's promise that Sarah would deliver a son in the geriatric ward with Medicare picking up the tab.

The promise seemed absurd to Abraham and Sarah. But then, in due course, Isaac — Laughter — was born. And the promise was fulfilled. And Abraham and Sarah knew that the joke was on them, and they laughed. And God laughed too, because Abraham and Sarah were delighted. And God was delighted. And all faithful people have been delighted ever since.

And that's why we can sing, even today, as we will when we ask Jesus to come among us, "Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia." Because we enter the journey into death with God's promise in our pockets.

The promise of God to *us* today is the same as his promise to Abraham and Sarah — that we will laugh again.

And the promise of God to *Ed* today is the same.

In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.