

**Death as Return**  
**John 19:28-30**  
***Good Friday, April 10, 2020***

I've been telling you about several books on Celtic spirituality I am reading again. One is Philip Newell's book, **One Foot in Eden**. I took the title of his last chapter for my sermon, 'death as return'. We did so because our faith refuses to stop at Good Friday. This is not to diminish the suffering and anguish that death brings. But we are after all Easter people who view life, including death in all its ugliness and reality, from the vantage point of Easter morning.

I've discovered that the Celtic tradition of spirituality has many beautiful prayers which express the idea of life as journey, with death as a marker on the way. For example, the Celts imagine the saints in heaven standing on the other side of the grave awaiting our arrival. And so we have prayers like this:

*Be each saint in heaven, each sainted woman in heaven, each  
angel in heaven, stretching their arms for you, smoothing the  
way for you, when you go hither over the river hard to see;*

The very notion of woman acting as midwives of the dead, ushering them into the new dimension of life that awaits us, is a powerful one. As we are reminded by Newell, none of us remember our passage from the comfort of the womb into life, nor will we probably remember our passage from the womb of life into the realm of the dead. What is inescapable is the fact that life is a journey from birth through the experiences of life to our final departure point. T.S. Elliot expresses this in a few well-known lines of a poem:

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time."*

Death is therefore, in this vision, as in the Celtic tradition, a return. We have done our best in our present culture to cushion ourselves as much as possible from the reality of death. In many ways death today is like sex in the Victorian era, kept under wraps. But through our funeral practices and the way we try to keep children and the

young from peeping behind the curtain of the living into the chamber of the dead, is testimony to how much we fear this intrusion.

But Good Friday will not allow us to hide from the reality and power of death. Here on a hillside, a lonely figure hangs between two others, his body weakened by torture and abuse, his head slumped. But the stake on which he hangs pierces heaven and the sky turns dark and menacing. Is this but one more Roman cross, one more victim of the empire's brutality? Or is this Jesus of Nazareth different? Our text says that Jesus' final words, "It is finished", denote a surprising twist to the usual story of death. What is finished. The journey of life?

The Gospel answers with a bold and unexpected response. This is no lonely, helpless victim of Roman injustice and brutality. This is rather God's provision for our sins. This is God's response to our rebellion. While we were yet sinners, Paul says, Christ died for us is the consistent message of the New Testament. But it also affirms that death remains the last enemy. There on that cross death is led a merry dance and once and for all emptied of its menace. You see Friday is forever illuminated by Easter Sunday morning. Paul shouts in triumph, "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

In light of this glorious Gospel affirmation, we can truly see death as return. Return to which beginning? Our beginning in God's creative act. Created by God we in death return to our maker. We sing, "When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we've first begun." We can sing this with confidence because on that lonely hillside called Calvary Jesus Christ opened the door to this extraordinary future. This is the good news. The old Celtic prayer goes like this:

*As Thou wast before  
At my life's beginning,  
Be Thou so again  
At my journey's end.*

**Amen**