

Hosanna

St. John's Episcopal Church: 16 June 2007

A Service of Witness to the Resurrection: Rebecca W. Goodwin

*Reading of the lessons: Isaiah 25⁶⁻⁹; Lamentations 3^{22-26, 31-33}; John 11^{1-6, 17-27, 38-44}; 14¹⁻⁷,
19¹⁶⁻³⁰*

I am often amazed when I hear someone remark that the Bible is boring. I think of the war epics in Kings and Chronicles; there is the sizzling romance in the Song of Solomon; Esther has political intrigue full of byzantine characters; of course, who can forget the psychedelic “Age of Aquarius” book of Revelation? But even if all of these ripe-for-Hollywood pieces of Scripture are discounted, there are still yet those vast passages which give us some guidance in times of confusion, some solace in times of despair. Our Gospel lesson this morning is one such narrative. Lazarus has fallen ill. His sisters are worried. Our Lord doesn't seem quite as agitated. “His illness will not lead to death,” Christ proclaims, “but is for the glory of God.” Our Lord is sufficiently convinced of this that—in spite of his deep love for Lazarus and Mary and Martha—he lingers in town where he is staying for a couple more days. You know the story, Lazarus dies. Everyone is confused and despondent. Christ arrives too late, so thinks everyone. Maybe Mary and Martha said it in faith or maybe they said it accusingly or maybe it was some marriage of the two: Lord, if you had been around, our brother would not have died. It is an understandable sentiment echoed in many places in Scripture: God, where were you when I needed you? Jesus makes his answer: He commands those nearby to remove the stone that sealed Lazarus' tomb. And then he thanks his Father. And then he commands Lazarus to “come out”! Lazarus, like a good little boy, does as he is told. He walks, resurrected, out of the tomb. Our Lord says to the crowd to unbind Lazarus and

let him go. As the text says, “the dead man came out.” Much to everyone’s surprise, Death’s grip on Lazarus is weak.

Death’s grip on Becky Goodwin is weak. Perhaps this is because of Becky’s *joie de vivre*, her fullness of living, her ability to, as Thoreau wrote, suck the very marrow out of life. Or perhaps Death’s grip on Becky is weak because of her fighting spirit—a tenacity that bordered on the defiant. There is a great scene in First Samuel where David is playing the lyre for Saul, who is king. David is beloved of everyone and Saul, not so much. Overwhelmed by jealousy, Saul throws a spear at David to, as the text puts it, pin David to the wall. David runs. Christians, let me suggest to you that Becky would not have run. Becky would have, shall we say, returned the spear to its rightful owner. It is not hard to think of Becky remembering John Donne: “Death be not proud, though some have called thee mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so. . . .Death, thou shalt die.” Or perhaps Death’s grip on Becky is weak because of what we read later in the Gospel reading. Not the part about Lazarus dying, but the part about Christ dying. That part where our Lord was crucified. Death had a pretty weak hold on him, too; it wasn’t too long that our Lord was resurrected in the power of the Spirit and to the glory of God. And unlike poor Lazarus, who would go on to die a second death, Christ did not die again, but, as we will momentarily proclaim in the Creed, he ascended into heaven. Or, in other words, Christ beat Death. He actually beat Death on the cross; the whole resurrection and ascension thing was the whole Super Bowl ad campaign that advertises Death has been vanquished. Death’s grip on Becky is weak, because Christ’s grip on her is stronger. Death’s grip on us is temporary, because Christ’s grip on us perseveres.

In Rutter's *Requiem*, the "Pie Jesu" is soft and contemplative, almost sonorous. It is followed by the "Sanctus", which begins a bit perkier, but then crescendos into exhilarating hosannas. We stand now, this day, in that space between the "Pie Jesu" and the "Sanctus", in that gap between melancholy and joy; in that place where we feel the quickness of our grief, yet stare still straight ahead into that exhilarating hosanna of knowing Becky's suffering is no more; that exhilarating hosanna that she is now running the show in the Church Triumphant (☩); that exhilarating hosanna that her baptism is fulfilled as she steps into Christ's kingdom; that exhilarating hosanna that our baptism will, on a day not far from now, be fulfilled by our stepping into Christ's kingdom; that exhilarating hosanna that Christ's grip on us all refuses to be broken. The first few verses of Hebrews chapter twelve say that, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us throw off the entanglements of sin that cling to us and instead run the race of endurance that is set before us, keeping our eyes focused on Christ, who is the author and perfecter of our faith. Our Becky is now part of that great cloud of witnesses. She urges us on to sing, to live, but above all to run that race, to focus on Christ. When Page was six years old, Becky was directing one of her manifold children's choirs. Page stepped out of the choir and tugged on the hem of Becky's dress: "Mommy, when you get to heaven will you direct the choir there?" Prince Charles once said, "If English is spoken in heaven, then God indubitably employs Thomas Cranmer as his speechwriter." Christians, if music is played in heaven, then God indubitably employs Becky as his choir director. She has reached the fullness of living; she hears now the perfection of the sacred music she holds so dear; and reminds us, even this moment, that Death is weak, Christ is strong, and his grip on us keeps us until that day when we are reunited with her,

reunited with each other, and reunited with Christ. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.