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 Easter Day C: 1 Corinthians 15:19-26  
 St. Anne's Church, Annapolis, MD  
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*Trust in the End of the Story*

Last year I was in Chicago for a conference. When my flight was scheduled to leave O'Hare airport, we boarded the plane and taxied out toward the runway. The flight attendant made her safety announcements, showed us how to fasten and unfasten the seatbelt, demonstrated the use of the oxygen mask, and pointed out the emergency exits. We made sure our seatbacks and tray tables were in their full, upright, and locked positions. The pilot came on the loudspeaker and told us we were twelfth in line for takeoff, and that it would just be a little wait.

Then the storm hit. The sky turned black. Rain started pouring down. The winds came up and started shaking the plane back and forth. The pilot came on again and said we wouldn't be going anywhere anytime soon. With how violently the wind was blowing, that was just fine with me.

The storm kept raging. We sat on the plane, waiting for a break in the weather. When the flight attendants started bringing around refreshments, we all knew we were going to be there awhile. Passengers were bonding with each other well, which is good because as the hours were passing, frustrations could have run high.

After about three hours, there seemed to be a lull in the storm. The pilot came on and said, "They're going to let the first plane take off and see how it goes. If their departure goes okay, they'll let the rest of us take off." A number of people said at once, "See how it goes? I am so glad we're not on that first plane!" And if it doesn't go well? Well, I guess they have eleven other chances to get it right . . .

The first plane apparently was not struck by lightning or blown out of the sky, so the pilot started our engines and we made our way towards take off. We turned a corner, and just then, the wind started blowing again, really strong crosswinds. We were moving forward, gaining speed, but we were also being jerked violently side to side. This did not feel right: rolling forward, but whipping sideways, lurching side to side as the wind howled. You could feel the nervous tension on the plane. Was this okay? Would we be alright?

Then a man sitting towards the back spoke up. He said, calmly and clearly, "It will be okay, once we get up in the air." Really? That is precisely where it seemed we would *not* be okay. How could leaving earth be a good idea? But he said with confidence, "As soon as our wheels lift off the ground, we'll be fine. You'll see." Sure enough, the plane lifted, the lurching stopped, our flight up above the retreating storm clouds was underway. We were safely on our way home.

It will be okay, you'll see.

The man knew. His experience, his confidence said, "I know how this works out. I know how this story ends. It all works out."

Sometimes, especially when we're heading into something new, we want to know – does it all work out? If we could just know what the future holds, we'll be alright.

Guess what: We know the end of the story, the most important story, the story at the heart of our faith, the story that comes from the heart of God, our God who is love. God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, defeating death forever. Death no longer has the last word, the last laugh, the last victory. Life is stronger than death. Love is stronger than hate. God raised Jesus Christ from the dead and the world is forever changed. In our second reading for today, from 1 Corinthians, we see our future and it looks like this: "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. . . For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. . . Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end. . . The last enemy to be destroyed is death." We know the end of the story.

That's the future we're living towards. God in Christ has defeated death. We have died to sin and been made alive to God. Because of what

Christ has accomplished for us, we will be raised. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. God will prevail. Because God has conquered the future, there is nothing in the past or the present or the future that can frighten or inhibit or intimidate us any longer. As Philips Brooks once said, “The great Easter truth is not that we are to live newly after death, but that we are to be new here and now by the power of the resurrection.” The good news of Easter is that there is the possibility of new life now here, today, even for you, even for me.

I have seen the power that comes from having faith in the end of the story. I have seen lives touched when someone who has faith in the end of the story reaches out to help someone who doesn't know how the story ends. I saw it recently: The man was an addict. It had gotten so bad for him he had gone to prison because of his habit. But years had passed. He served his sentence, was released. He wanted a fresh start, a new beginning, a clean page for the next chapter. But still, it was hard to be out. Too much freedom. Too new. He got drunk one day in the middle of the day, and she found him. Gave him her number. Gave him the address and time of the next meeting. Just one addict trying to help another. He called one day to thank her. For reaching out. For being there. For getting him connected with others. “I can't believe it,” he told her, “all these people helping me. Why would they do that? It makes no sense.” “Get over it,” she said. “It's just what we do.” New life? Impossible? Get over it. It's just what we do. When we know the end of the story – anything becomes possible, even new life in this one.

I've seen it in a parish hall full of Easter baskets prepared lovingly for strangers, people who need some help with the basics just now. “We just have to help one another, don't we?” one woman said as she dropped off bags of groceries. “We need to remind people that no one is in this alone.” I've seen it in gifts for the Light House Shelter, in people preparing for a trip to Guatemala, in efforts to reach out to the Clay Street neighborhood, in the hope and hard work of people who tutor at the Stanton Center. I've seen signs of new life and trust in the end of the story all around this place as we live into a bright new day at St. Anne's Church. What else is God calling us to, what other new risks can we take, because we know that God has already set us free from the tyranny of death and all the little ways death tries to claim us each day?

We know the end of the story. And knowing the end of the story gives us power and hope, even when confronting death itself.

*Wit* is the title of a movie, based on a play by Margaret Edson.<sup>i</sup> It's about a woman named Vivian Bearing, an English professor, a demanding scholar whose specialty is John Donne, the sixteenth-century poet and Anglican priest. Vivian is dying of cancer and she is mostly alone, dealing with doctors and nurses and hospitals and researchers who convince her to submit to a particularly powerful and painful experimental regimen of chemotherapy. She loses her hair, weight, is terribly sick, and the chemotherapy does not work. Her tumor shrinks but the cancer spreads. She is going to die. Throughout the story, John Donne's "Holy Sonnets," her academic specialization, keeps coming up in memory, in conversation. Donne wrote:

Death be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so . . .  
Why swell'st thou then?  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

Vivian's doctoral advisor and mentor, a very distinguished professor, taught Vivian that sonnet with its confident assertion: death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

Her professor, now an elderly woman, comes to see Vivian, finds her alone in her hospital room, looks at Vivian in her bed, and says, "Vivian—is that you? Oh Vivian," and then does a remarkable thing— she removes her shoes and gets into the hospital bed and holds Vivian, cradling her head to her breast. She opens a package, this dignified, sophisticated scholar of sixteenth-century English literature, and reads Vivian the book she has brought with her. It's not John Donne; it's a simple child's book about love that will not let us go. It is about what John Donne wrote about. It is about love more powerful than death.

“Once there was a little bunny, who wanted to run away. So he said to his mother, “I am running away.” “If you run away,” said his mother, “I will run after you, for you are my little bunny.”

"If you run after me," said the little bunny, "I will become a fish in a trout stream and I will swim away from you." "If you become a fish in a trout stream," said his mother, "I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you."

"I will be come a rock," "and I will become a mountain climber and I will climb to where you are."

"I will become a bird and fly away from you." "If you become a bird and fly away from me," said his mother, "I will be a tree that you come home to."<sup>iii</sup>

"And death shall be no more," John Donne wrote. "Death, *thou* shalt die."

Death no longer rules. We know the end of the story. The defeat of death and evil is something God has already, in Christ, accomplished, our being beloved of God something God has already claimed, so our future is already available to us: we know the end of the story. And rather than living out of our past, the way we've already lived, the mess we're in, the trouble we can't seem to shake, the disappointment that hounds us, the sin that tries to capture us over and over again, the death we fear, we can live out of God's future. We can do the hard thing of loving one another as Christ has loved us. We can trust that God will prevail, and despite present circumstances, whatever they may be, because we are joined to Jesus Christ, we too will know Christ's resurrection victory. Trust in the end of the story means change is possible, joy is probable, and hope -- hope is just plain good sense.

It all works out in the end. Let's not wait until the end to claim our new life now.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> The Rev. John Buchanan, Senior Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago used this scene in an Easter sermon. You can watch this scene and other scenes from the movie on youtube.

<sup>ii</sup> *The Runaway Bunny*, by Margaret Wise Brown.