### “Swallow Up Death” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, April 28, 2019

**Isaiah 25:6–8** On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear. 7 And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; 8he will swallow up death for ever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces.

**Matt 28:1–10** After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 2And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 4For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. 5But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. 6He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 7Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” 8So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.9Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. 10Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

The Isaiah passage seems to be a promise of world peace, a banquet at which all the nations will participate. In the dangerous world in which Judah lived, war was a constant threat, so this is a meaningful prophecy. It says God “will make for all peoples a feast of rich food . . . . And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples” (Isa 25:7). But Isaiah goes beyond this promise of reconciliation between peoples. He says God “will swallow up death forever,” and “will wipe away the tears from all faces” (Isa 25:8). Now that really sounds more like an afterlife promise. I’m not sure the Jewish people knew what to do with this when they first heard it. They did not have much of an afterlife concept. The end of death and of tears is a completely new message.

This was written before the Daniel passage that says “those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake” (12:2), in other words, before the earliest clear resurrection passage. Isaiah did not have much to work with, as regards teaching about the afterlife, but he bravely planted a seed of hope that seems to have stimulated conversation and anticipation. By Jesus’ time, there was widespread debate and speculation about the afterlife, but there was no standard Jewish belief or doctrine. In fact, the same is true about Christianity. Although the afterlife is central to Christian belief, there is no standard teaching about it that everyone shares. There are many different concepts of heaven, and of hell as well, and not all Christians *believe* in hell, which draws heavily on ideas that emerged in the Middle Ages. The place for us to start is with the gospel stories about the Resurrection of Jesus, and we look at Matthew’s now.

The women have gone to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body, but they are surprised by an earthquake and then by a dazzling angel, who says, “He is not here, for he has been raised . . . . Go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead’” (28:6–7). And so, it is their delight *and* their duty to spread the good news of the Resurrection.

At first, Matthew says nothing of the women’s feelings, but they must be excited. But we can see their reaction When Jesus meets them, they throw themselves down at his feet and worship him. Really, they are overwhelmed with emotion. Their Master has risen from the dead! What a glorious reversal of what they *thought* were the glum facts!

Jesus greets them; then he comforts them: “Greetings! . . . Do not be afraid.” After that he commands them to tell the good news to the apostles, and tell them to go back home, to Galilee, where he will appear to them.

This seems to describe a pattern that also applies in our faith journey. Just as the women were overwhelmed with joy upon seeing their risen Master, so we, when we were young Christians, were full of joyous emotion and excitement, and we threw ourselves at Jesus’ feet. Jesus says “Greetings,” and pauses to let us enjoy this moment.

Then the actual instruction begins. He says “Do not be afraid.” That is something we learn from Jesus in our faith walk. He teaches us to live courageously and confidently. The letter to the Hebrews says he came to “free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death” (2:15). Maybe that lesson comes easily, maybe it comes with some difficulty, but we experience it as taking instruction from Jesus. Following Jesus means allowing ourselves to be changed. We need to become braver disciples. That means braver in our *thinking*, as well as braver in our outward living.

Then he says “go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” This involves looking ahead, and anticipating meeting Jesus there. So you return to Galilee, that is, to your *life*, and you make sure you are ready to meet Jesus there. Another way to look at it is that you move *ahead* in your life in a way that anticipates meeting up with Jesus again. You make sure that acknowledging Jesus is central in your daily life. But it has a future element to it, where you are looking forward to being met by Jesus in the place where you are headed. You don’t just learn some facts about Jesus; you make a decision to grow closer to him, to learn about his way, and to reflect his nature more and more.

It does you little good to believe in Jesus’ resurrection if you do not also experience spiritual rebirth in your own life. The mystic Meister Eckhart said, “what good is it if Christ was born in Judaea, if he is not born again in my heart?” The birth of Christ in the heart is *everything*. And with it comes the faith that you will be raised from the dead, too. Jesus has walked the way before you. Know that, after this life, more, much more awaits you.

The good news includes both the Resurrection of Jesus and the promise of resurrection for all of us. Paul connects the two: “we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom 6:5). Isaiah told us God would swallow up death. The gospel confirms this.

We have to look ahead, expecting to be met by Jesus. In the next life, we will live on a more spiritual level. We will not have the problem of limited lifespan or of disease or accidents. So we can *really* get to work studying and serving and loving. But all of that has begun down here. Studying, serving, and loving are our assignment *here*, as well.

So let us remember how Jesus greeted us, and how we felt, “the hour we first believed.” And then listen to the instruction “Do not be afraid.” Be braver in your *thinking*, and have a brave *heart*, ready to be led by the Spirit. Then go ahead to *your* Galilee, your home, and *believe* that you will meet Jesus there. He will help you at key moments in your life. Trust that he intends to do that. It may or may not come with an intense religious experience. It might be much quieter than that. But know that you will be met by Jesus in the place where you are headed. “There they will see me,” Jesus said. And they *did* see the risen Jesus, most of them more than once, and their lives were never the same again.

Let us go forth in the knowledge that we can be free, no longer the prisoners of fear. The Father has sent his Son, and our lives are renewed in *his* Peace and Love.