

Easter, 2008
St. Raphael, Springdale, AR

When I was in high school I read a very disturbing book that still haunts me to this day. It was called, *Death Be Not Proud* by John Gunther. Now, truth be told, it's actually a very inspiring book written by a father about his brilliant son who is diagnosed with a brain tumor and dies by the age of 17. A death at the tender age of 17 is tragic by any standard. But what made this young man so special was his intellectual gifts and his zeal for life; he had been accepted to Harvard. By the end of the book you really feel like it is a shame that a man with so much potential had to die, and that somehow death itself should be ashamed for taking his life, hence the title of the book, *Death Be Not Proud*. But what disturbed me about the book was not so much all that, but rather how the parents didn't have a sense of heaven or any hope of seeing their son again. The young man's mother commented: "What does it mean? What can it mean now? To me it means loving life more, being more aware of life, of one's fellow human beings, of the earth." Now it's certainly good that death opened this mother's eyes to people and places around her, but how sad that it didn't also open her eyes to heaven. That book showed me how depressing life would be if there was no heaven.

In the second reading today from Romans, St. Paul explains that those who are baptized into Christ have a totally different view of life, death and heaven. Listen to how he puts it: "We were indeed buried with him through baptism

into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life." In other words, Jesus' resurrection lifts our hopes beyond the limits of this world, and raises them to the heights of heaven. You know, they say there are two things you cannot avoid: death and taxes (unless, of course, if you vote for a Republican president). Well, they're right about taxes, but not about death. You see, for those baptized into Jesus, as St. Paul tells the Philippians, death is actually a gain, not a loss. St. Paul is saying that Jesus' resurrection opens us radically new possibilities, not limited to this world, but stretching out into eternity.

Recently a friend shared this little joke with me. The school children had all been photographed, and the teacher was trying to persuade them each to buy a copy of the class group picture. She told them: "Just think how nice it will be to look at it when you are all grown up and say: 'There's Jennifer, she's a lawyer.' Or 'that's Michael, he's a doctor.' Just then a small voice at the back of the room rang out: "And there's the teacher, she's dead." Now, you know, if that had been a Catholic school, the teacher could have replied, "Actually, Johnny, I will be more alive than you are right now!" You see, when we bring the resurrection into the picture (pun intended!), suddenly everything changes: death is not the end, it's merely the beginning.

Folks, it's amazing how we try very hard to avoid death, or at least we want to delay it as long as possible. My

mother, for example, whom I love dearly by the way, refuses to let anyone talk about death; for her it's the "D-word" and she better not catch you using it around the house. Or, let me ask you: how many have you have made arrangements for your funeral or worked on your last will and testament? By the way, since we're talking about it, be sure to include St. Raphael in your estate planning, okay? Americans spend billions of dollars annually on age-defying creams, botox injections, yoga classes, and a thousand and one other strategies to stay young. I personally subscribe to the French secret to long life: a glass of red wine every night! But sooner or later we must all face death, whether as a 17 year old with a brain tumor or as an octogenarian in a hospice home. And, folks, we really only have two options: we can limit our hopes to this world and in the end be very depressed and disappointed, or, remembering the resurrection, we can lift our hopes can as high as heaven. Folks it's Jesus' resurrection that makes all the difference: it changes how we look at death, and it also changes how we look at life.

It's ironic that that title of the book *Death Be Not Proud*, are the first words of Sonnet 10 by John Donne, because the poem is very different than the book. The actual poem goes like this:

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so,
For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,
Die not, poore death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

...

One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; death thou shalt die."

John Donne was an Anglican priest, for whom the resurrection of Jesus was the rock of his faith. Today as we celebrate Easter, may Jesus' resurrection be the rock foundation of our faith, so that, like that elementary school teacher, one day we too may be more alive than we are today.

Praised be Jesus Christ!