

John 14:1-6
Requiem Mass for
John Denton Montgomery
March 28th, 2017
The Rev. John Forman

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.” In leaving us these words, Jesus did not seek to tame death, suppress death or look past death. Jesus conquered death and on Easter morning in a couple of weeks, we will celebrate the reality that death no longer has the last word.

The Episcopal Church considers *this* liturgy to be an Easter liturgy. Our rituals for the dead are deeply rooted in our trust in the resurrection, and so we come together with a mix of thoughts and emotions. Each of us carries in our hearts this evening, not a single note, but a chord made up of some combination of beliefs and feelings. Whatever the combination is for you: “do not let your hearts be troubled.”

In other words, do not imagine that you are only allowed to have one response. Joy and acceptance and peacefulness, while they are not the only acceptable responses, will over time become sources of healing. But sorrow or numbness or disappointment are not un-Christian. Some or all these reactions and others may be present in your heart and mind. Imagine that combination to be a chord sounding from within the unique instrument that each of us is. A chord that comes together to create a sound that doesn't erase perspectives and sentiments but one that exists in addition to each of the individual notes.

Emotions and thoughts, like sounds, blend and resonate and harmonize with each other in endless ways. When they come together with the hearts and minds of other people, as they have in this sanctuary tonight, they create a theme – a larger, more inclusive sound that expands and fills without any sense of crowding. The theme and the sound is love. So: “do not let your hearts be troubled.” Do not let your hearts be persuaded to feel any differently than they do. Even if, like Job, your heart faints within you.

Let your hearts sing whatever notes and chords are there for you. In that way, this sanctuary becomes a symphony of love; a concert devoted to both the universal love that St. Paul wrote about to the Corinthians and the particular love that we carry for our brother John this evening.

And trust that the Risen Christ is also present, resonating and harmonizing with us. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, we share in the relationship of the

One Holy and Undivided Trinity. The God who created us in love will transform each of us from natural, earthly things that die in one form into new forms of life; new forms of life that give life. Trust that.

In our dying, we draw nearer to the heart of the relationship of the Trinity; we enter more fully into the loving grace that is “the way and the truth and the life.” And the realm of God’s heaven comes closer to wholeness here on earth through our relationships with others. That’s the truth that compels us to learn to live in communion with each other. Healthy and flourishing life is life *together*; unity in our differences, in the image of the One Holy and Undivided Trinity.

Jesus once asked his followers to think of our life together as a massive vine with more branches than we can imagine. Each of us, Jesus said, is like a branch that has life only because it is connected to the vine that nurtures and nourishes. The Risen Christ, in short, is the vine that gives each of us life. We don’t choose whether or not to be connected to that vine; all people are connected. Without that connection, we have no existence. Our choice is whether or not to accept the nurturing, the nourishment, that the vine freely provides. When we accept these gifts of grace, we grow and leaf out, and we produce buds that blossom into fruit that nourishes others.

If you want confirmation that dynamic, I would point you to the life and the fruit that John Montgomery is still giving us. Look around you, look within your own heart, and notice the love there that conveys John’s essence, his sense of adventure and his joy. John’s life and love are still producing fruit here and now.

You see, there are some who think of heaven as an escape from this world. Jesus did not. For Jesus, heaven had more to do with bringing the fullness of life and healing to the world we live in. That view turns our attention to the care and reconciliation of all the relationships that we have here and now. All the relationships that make our own life possible and full. And if heaven is the ultimate dwelling place of reconciled relationships that God has prepared for each of us, then John Montgomery is smiling in the midst of an impressive network of interconnected relationships from all over the U.S. and all over the world.

Jesus, the vine; God, the vine grower; Jack Montgomery, a particularly fruitful branch.

Jesus said that the life of the whole plant is the result of the love that courses through its parts. What exists and has life only exists because God loves, and each of us exists and has life because God loves us individually and collectively.

While we have breath, we learn to abide in God's love because when we do, we open ourselves to receive and extend the love flowing through us. When we begin to abide in the love of Christ, our lives become gifts for others; gifts of healing and teaching and companionship. And when we follow examples like the life and love of John Montgomery, we embrace a life of joy stimulated by curiosity, drawn into ever-expanding wonder until our joy is made complete, as John's joy is now.

The lesson, if we will hear it, is that the full and abundant life that God desires for every person is more than simply being connected to others. The way, the truth and the life is made full by our increasing awareness of and service to the Spirit of God's love flowing through us and among us. St. Paul wrote that nothing, *nothing*, can separate us from God's love—not life or death, not angels or spirits, not the present or the future, and not powers above or powers below. Nothing in all creation can separate us from the life is the light of all people: God's love for us in Christ Jesus.

And so we gather around this table our hearts resonating and harmonizing with each other and with the Risen Christ, trusting that our brother John also joins us in this thin space between the timeless and the timebound. We gather here in the on-going magnum opus of the communion of saints and all the company of God's heaven to invite the love of God to enter us, to come into our bodies and our hearts, to reinvigorate us to live as Christ.

Here, we receive in physical form the same presence that Jack now basks in more purely, the life and love of Christ that we will carry out to give to those with whom we are connected.

What better way to celebrate, even through our tears, our gratitude for the life and love of our brother, John?