

**Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta**

**“God’s Grace is Stronger than Death” (I Corinthians 15:3-10)**

**Easter Sunday: April 4, 2021**

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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It is a joy to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ with you! Christianity is a resurrection faith. We are resurrection people. Death was not the end of the story for Jesus Christ and death will not be the end of the story for you.

This past year we have seen a lot death. In the United States alone there have been over 30 million cases of COVID 19 and over 550,000 deaths. Perhaps you know someone who has died of COVID 19. Or perhaps you know someone like my daughter Abi (who is a nurse and one of my heroes) who has worked countless hours this past year caring for COVID patients who have suffered and in many cases died from it—people of all ages, from kids to young adults just out of college to parents leaving behind young children to elderly grandparents who had no idea that they had already hugged their kids and grandkids for the last time to dying patients who were not even able to have their loved ones in their hospital room to hold their hands or gently brush their foreheads and for whom FaceTime had to be enough. This past year the valley of the shadow of death has been very real.

But there is something even more real: the grace of God. God’s grace is stronger than death—that is the message of Easter. In today’s passage from his First Letter to the Corinthians Paul writes:

I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter (Cephas), then to the twelve (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

Paul then tells us there were many more eye witnesses to the Risen Jesus: “Then (Jesus) appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all...he appeared also to me” (1 Corinthians 15:3-8).

Later, after the Risen Jesus had appeared to these eyewitnesses, the fire of the Holy Spirit was poured out on Pentecost and the church was born and multitudes experienced the reality of the grace of God that is stronger than death. Initially Paul would have none of it...until he personally experienced the grace of God for himself, as he also wrote in today's passage: "I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:9-10). And what was true for Paul is true for you: by God's grace you are who you are and God's grace toward you has not been in vain because God's grace never ends and God's grace is stronger than death.

Recently my wife Steph shared with me a darkly hilarious note that had been posted on Facebook, a note written by an angry six-year old boy named Isaiah to his teacher, Mrs. Jones, at the Christian school he attended. Isaiah wrote:

Dear Mrs. Jones, I am angry at you because you took 25 of my hummingbird bucks all because I was talking to Connor. It's no big deal. I'm only 6. I can't be quiet all the time. And that makes you a thief and a crook, and when you die you are going to hell, real hell, the burning one because you are a thief. I worked hard for those bucks and my only prayer in chapel today was that God gets you to hell fast, super fast. And your new haircut is bad, real bad. Isaiah.

Now please don't ask me what "hummingbird bucks" are because I have no idea, but apparently they meant a lot to Isaiah. God bless poor Mrs. Jones! As absurd as this all sounds, Isaiah learned all that anger and judgment somewhere, learned about threatening others with eternal damnation in hell from somewhere. And unfortunately when it comes to Christianity, when it comes to the church, Isaiah is not alone in being angry and preoccupied with hell. There are many people out there who have been burned (pun intended) by such anger and judgment in the church—and as a result have become utterly disillusioned about the church or even disillusioned about the existence of God altogether. But the heart of the gospel is not death and damnation, but life and forgiveness. God is a God of grace—and God's grace is stronger than death. God is much more interested in giving people grace than as Isaiah put it, "getting" them to hell.

A couple months ago I reread a favorite book, the 1996 classic *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer and watched again the riveting 2007 film of the same name based on that book. *Into the Wild* recounts the true story of Chris McCandless, who was born the same year I was and grew up about fifteen minutes from me in Northern Virginia. I even took some high school students to Alaska on a mission trip in 1996, the same year the book was published.

After high school he attended Emory University and graduated with double majors in history and anthropology. But Chris had become utterly disillusioned his family and the trappings of “success” and yes, with the church—so he broke off all communication with his family, gave the \$24,500 balance of his education fund to charity and drove his 1982 Datsun B210 across the country. After losing his car in a flash flood he walked and hitch hiked all over West and Southwest, and later to Alaska, where with his backpack, 10 pounds of rice, a .22 rifle, and a few books he set out on the Stampede Trail in the Alaskan interior. He came across an old green and white abandoned Fairbanks City Transit bus (#142), and lived there several months, until his death August 1992 due to either eating poisonous roots he thought were edible or mold produced by these roots—the specifics are debatable.

Before hitchhiking from California to Alaska, Chris was befriended by a reclusive widower named Ron Franz, who had lost his family in a car accident. Ron let Chris stay at his house for a couple months, and grew concerned about Chris and encouraged him to contact his family, to reconsider his plans. In the film *Into the Wild* Ron is played brilliantly by Hal Holbrook. In one scene Chris ascends a steep rocky hill while Ron remains seated in his Ford Bronco. “Alaska?” Ron shouts to Chris, “Son, what the heck are you running from?” Chris shouts back, “You know, I could ask you the same question, except I already know the answer.” “Oh you do, do you?” “I do, Mr. Franz, you gotta get back into the world, get out of that lonely house, that little workshop of yours, get back out on the road.”

Ron waves his hand dismissively, but Chris continues, “Really! You’re gonna live a long time, Ron. You should make a radical change in your lifestyle. I mean the core of man’s spirit comes from new experiences, and there you are, a stubborn old man, sitting on your can.” “Sitting on my can?” Ron yells back, “Ha, I’ll show you!” And Ron begins climbing the rocks. When Ron finally reaches the summit he is very winded. He and Chris laugh as they sit together taking in the view.

Ron finally catches his breath, “I’m gonna miss you when you go.” Chris smiles, “I’ll miss you too, Ron.” Ron continues, “I wanna tell you something...from the bits and pieces I’ve put together from what you’ve told me about your family, about your mother and your dad—and I know you’ve got your problems with the church too—but there’s some kind of bigger thing we can all appreciate, and it sounds like you don’t mind calling it God.” Ron then looks Chris in the eyes, “But when you forgive, you love, and when you love, God’s light shines on you.”

Later Ron drives Chris to the highway where he will begin hitchhiking to Alaska. “Well my friend...I had an idea. You know my mother was an only child and so was my father, and I was their only child so when I’m gone I’m the end of the line, my family will be finished. What do you say you let me adopt you? I can be, say, your grandfather.” “Ron, could we talk about this when I get back from Alaska—would that be okay?” “Yeah, yeah, we can do that.” “All right, Ron, thank you!” Ron watches Chris cross the highway, knowing that time would never come.

Chris McCandless is a polarizing person. Some see him as an inspired adventurer who refused to succumb to the pressures and expectations of a consumerist society. Others see him as an arrogant and foolhardy narcissist whose hubris proved fatal. But I suspect God saw Chris McCandless, then and now, as someone who had simply grown disillusioned of everything—even the church, perhaps especially the church—and was searching for something better, something real. But Ron Franz was exactly right when he told Chris, “When you forgive, you love, and when you love, God’s light shines on you”—and as Chris lay in Fairways Transit bus #142, gazing through a dirty window to the gorgeous Alaska sky as his life slipped away, he was not alone at all...because God indeed forgives, God’s light indeed shone on him, and God’s grace is stronger than death.

Whether you can relate to Mrs. Jones because someone as charming a little 6-year old Isaiah has somehow blasted you, or to Chris McCandless because you have become really disillusioned even with the church, or to Ron Franz because you think your death will be the end of the line...the good news of the gospel on this Easter Sunday—which is even greater than COVID—remains the same: death is not the end of the story.

The Lord is risen...and the same Risen Christ who shone his light on the Apostle Paul shines on you today with grace that has never been and will never be in vain. God's grace is stronger than death—now and forever world without end.

Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

Amen.