

Requiescat in Pace ~ Joseph D. Belli

Joshua 1:1-9

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 20:24-31

Our Lord was a carpenter by trade but Jesus seems to have a regard for fishermen. Of His twelve disciples, at least four were fishermen – Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, James and his brother John. One of the Lord Christ's first signs was the miraculous catch of fish. They were all at the shore of the Sea of Galilee. A crowd had gathered to listen to Jesus as He proclaimed the word of God. So many were there that the Lord climbed into Simon's boat to push off a bit from the shore so the crowd could hear Him better. When His teaching had concluded, the Lord tells Simon that He's in the mood to go fishing. The boys are grumpy and they respond accordingly: Master, we worked all night long and we didn't catch a single fish (Luke 5:5). It wasn't long before Simon capitulated. "But at your word I will let down the nets" (Luke 5:5). And then... muscles straining to pull in the nets, eyes wide with wonder, elation at seeing the enormous catch – it was a miracle. The harvest was in the boats and Peter knew whose presence he was in – and that made Peter tremble. "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8).

Joe was a fisherman. I doubt that Joe ever went fishing with a net. Joe was more of a rod and reel guy, a deep sea fisherman. Like His four fisherman disciples, Jesus is rather fond of Joe. Around here, there was not an uptight bone in Joe Belli's body. He was calm, affable, certainly capable of seeing the import of the moment but usually light-hearted and casually putting others at ease. It's a gift – naturally being of good humor. Most of us wear a multitude of hats, and Joe was no different. Sometimes people can see the shadow, the outline of the other hats we wear. Not Joe – unless there was some critical overlap. Work was work, home was home, and church was church. Joe was the chairman of our school board for a bunch of years. He had a command of our budget, our staff, our day-to-day operations, and our long-term mission. Joe wore a badge. Most of us think two things when we think of policemen – protect and serve.

There are things that policemen go through that we civilians could only guess at – serious things, life and death things, sometimes ugly things, depressing things. I have no doubt that Joe saw his fair share and it must've affected him on some level – but he carried it selflessly. Joe didn't burden Andrea or the girls with his work. Be strong and courageous – that's what God told Joshua. Moses was dead and Joshua had to shoulder the burden of the people of Israel. Joshua was the one who brought the Israelites across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land. "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9). Most of us don't get to choose what challenges God allows in our lives. We all have crosses of some sort to bear. Men and women of faith pray that they might be able to bear their crosses courageously. Self-pity is a disease of character that is unwelcome on a police force and contrary to our Lord's character. Joe knew that.

A Rubik's cube that fights back – that's how I describe facing a problem that seems to be unwinnable. Personally, I couldn't do a Rubik's cube for all the tea in China, but some folks can. Not if it fights back. Enduring a menacing cancer *and* navigating the medical bureaucracy

– Andrea said that it was like encountering one brick wall after another. There were angelic humans who attempted to help the Bellis – you know who you are – but, humanly speaking, there was no miracle worker. Frustration, alarm, and pain – it mounted on Joe and Andrea, Jilian and Ava – Jan too. Thomas, the apostle Thomas, had seen the Lord crucified. Hope had been crucified in Thomas’ heart. Imagine seeing all that you knew to be good made a public spectacle, horribly mocked and cruelly tortured. That’s what Thomas saw. His heart had been blistered. Each of us have hidden defense mechanisms. Thomas deployed his. Thomas’ defense mechanism was deployed to ensure that he would never endure that kind of pain again. Thomas’ defense mechanism was denial. The other apostles told Thomas the good news. Jesus was alive. They had seen Him. Thomas had hardened his heart. He protested fiercely: “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe” (John 20:25). Have you ever felt that? Have you ever protested against God’s goodness, God’s plan, God’s ultimate victory because your heart had been blistered with grief?

Eight days later, Jesus again appears to the disciples and Thomas is with them. The crucified King greets them with a declaration of peace and then turns all of His attention to Thomas. “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it into my side. Do not disbelieve but believe” (John 20:27). Thomas is overwhelmed by the stunning reality of a resurrected King, a death-defeating Messiah. His response is timeless. His response speaks for all of Christendom: “Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’” (John 20:28). Resurrection drives Christianity. The Son of God defeated death by dying, by bearing the load of our sin on the holy cross and dying. That dead Messiah rose on Easter. He is alive. Resurrection drives Christianity, drives the hearts of believers, and drives this memorial service. My Lord and my God! Joe carried Thomas’ confession of faith in his own heart as he encountered a cancer that was like a defiant Rubik’s cube. Even in his worst moments, Joe knew this: Death has no sting (1 Corinthians 15:55-57). Jesus told Joe that He prepared a place for him in His kingdom. Jesus told Joe that He prepared a place for Joe at the eternal wedding banquet. Jesus told Joe that He had prepared a place for Joe in His Father’s house. Joe’s place was prepared two-thousand years ago as Jesus ascended into heaven with our humanity.

Joe didn’t get to choose the final setting in which he was to demonstrate strength and courage. It was chosen for him. Whatever one sows, that will he also reap (Galatians 6:7). Have you ever heard that? It’s a common sentiment. Some folks call it karma. Some folks say ‘what goes around comes around’ but it’s the same idea. Joe believed it, taught it to his girls. Daily, Joe held himself with dignity. His uniform, his character, his approach to parenting, his approach to service to the community, to Christ’s church – dignity, honor, he knew that he represented something greater than himself. Protect and serve – that’s what Joe sowed. What Joe reaped, his legacy, is those two daughters. His character is in them. I suggest to you that grace animated Joe’s character, his outlook. “When you were dead in trespasses and sins, God made you alive in Christ, it is by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:5). Grace; to be loved when you are unlovely; to be forgiven, completely and totally forgiven; to receive a bounty of divine favor knowing you did nothing to deserve it. Do y’all encounter grace in this life? The man who knows God’s grace – how does he treat his fellow man? Joe’s outlook was forged by faith. He knew he was loved. Joe knew that he was forgiven. Joseph Dominick knew the Lord of the cross shed His blood for him, died for him, rose again for him. Be strong and courageous –

grace was the catalyst for Joe to be strong and courageous as he faced an adversary he could not overcome.

Some of us men are blessed. Why? Because we married a good woman. Eve was created from one of Adam's ribs. Martin Luther called his wife 'Katie my rib.' Andrea saw Joe through this last year with unwavering fidelity, unwavering compassion, fortitude and emotional strength. He relied on her. There is nothing more intimate than helping someone die. Humanly speaking, Andrea did all that she could. There is a point at which our abilities end. Be sure of this, Christ loved Joe to the full (John 13:1). He was there. The crucified King was with Joe throughout – nursing His soul, assuring Joe of His presence, and lifting up promise after promise in Joe's heart. Christ was there because He is the True Fisherman. Jesus cast the net of the Gospel into the sea of humanity and caught Joe Belli and hauled Joe into His church, into the ark of this church specifically. Christ sowed death and resurrection in Joe Sunday after Sunday. Christ reaped the harvest of a believer, a child of the light. It's the Son of God who protects and serves. His blood covered Joe and the Lord served Joe with His grace. Strong and courageous – a Christian man is called to be strong and courageous. Where medicine stopped, where marital love could do no more, Jesus stepped into that place, needing no invitation. Christ was there when Joe's life in this world ended. My Lord and my God! No more pain. No more doubt or fear or troubled heart or loneliness or anxiety or regret – My Lord and my God! Joe saw the wounds in Christ's flesh. Joe saw and continues to see the glory of our King. My Lord and my God!

Jesus said to Thomas: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed" (John 20:29). That's you and me. That was Joe in this life but Joe is more blessed now because Joe sees the Lord face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12). Thanks be to God, Joe sees the Lord face to face. Life is the victor. Easter is eternal victory. Joe is in heaven.