

“He Will Wipe Every Tear”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

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¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. ⁷Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. (Revelation 21:1-7)

About seven years ago, I remember being in the hospital visiting a church member who was recuperating from surgery. The hospital was packed that week, so the only recovery room they had for him was in the pediatric ward. As I was about to enter his room, I heard a little child crying down the hall.

I’ve found that, if you listen closely to the cry of a child, there is a lot you can hear. For example, I knew this cry was not from a newborn baby, but the child was still very young... probably a year old or so. And it seemed that there was more behind this cry than physical pain. There was also fear -- and helplessness. Or maybe that’s just what I felt, as I heard that sad little cry.

I stopped there in the hall as the sound washed over me, and my imagination began to race. I wondered what illness had brought that little child to the hospital. I wondered what kind of procedure she was enduring. And I wondered if she had someone with her. I hoped so much that she was not alone in her pain.

When my visit with my parishioner was over and I stepped back out into the hall, the crying had stopped. It wasn’t on my way, but I still wandered down toward the place where it had been. When I got there, the door was open, and I glanced into the room. Sure enough, the little girl was about twelve months old. She was being held by her mother, resting with her head on her mother’s chest. She was asleep. For the moment, she was safe and secure. For the moment, the churning around her had stopped, and the waters of her little world were glassy and calm. But I knew they probably wouldn’t stay that way for long. Soon another nurse would be back to give her another shot or take some more blood, and the pain and fear would be back.

When the book of Revelation refers to the sea, it speaks to the things that cause cries like the one I heard that day. In Genesis, in the beginning, the sea was dark, churning, frightening chaos. It represented that which could not be controlled. Our story with God begins with the Holy Spirit hovering over this roiling pit of peril. With a divine word, God tames the chaos and brings order. But note that the sea is not removed. It is bounded and given limits, but it remains. And as any boater knows, calm seas can turn angry at a moment’s notice.



The presence of the sea remains throughout the entire biblical story. God is alive in the world as a healing, loving, gracious presence, but the pain of human existence is never fully removed. God liberates Israel from bondage, but Israel's troubles are far from over. God blesses the kingdom of David, but not all kings are good and faithful, not all eras are peaceful and happy. In time, Jesus is given as a gift to the world, but even he cannot cure every illness, cleanse every leper, or feed every hungry person. Even he has to face the storms of Galilee and the ultimate storm of death on a cross. And although he defeats death on Easter Sunday, no one can say, or would dare to claim, that pain, suffering, and sorrow have been removed from the world.

But here, in Revelation, near the very end of the biblical story, we are told that there will be an end to all of that. John of Patmos is given a revelation, an ultimate vision of "*a new heaven and a new earth.*" In his early visions, when he was shown the throne of God, that sea that God had calmed and ordered in creation was still there. It was glassy and smooth, but the threat of chaos was present, even then, even there. But now, as John gazes upon the new Jerusalem that is coming, he looks and he sees that "*the sea was no more.*" Even the threat of pain, the chance of loss, had finally been swept away.

And then a loud voice echoes over the scene, shaking the pillars of creation. "*The home of God is now with mortals,*" it says. Anything that has, or does, or might stand between us and God is gone forever.

"God himself will be with them," the voice continued. *"He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."*

For obvious reasons, this passage from Revelation 21 is one of my favorites for funerals. When we celebrate the resurrection of a loved one, we celebrate the fact that, for them, the sea is no more. Chaos, darkness, peril, and pain are not just tamed; they are gone. For them, even the specter of death, which scripture calls "the last enemy," has been defeated. There is no longer any threat, any obstacle, or any pitfall that stands between them and the loving presence of God.

This, I would say, is the very heart and essence of the Good News -- good news that, in just a few moments, we will celebrate with ringing bells and the lighting of candles. When the church celebrates All Saints Day, we claim this ultimate joy and victory for those we have loved and lost. In their passing, a part of us has died as well, but the peace that is now theirs also provides us with one of life's most precious joys. We know that none of those people who were taken from us were perfect. We concede that all of them were sinners just like we are sinners. But we still rightly call them saints, because we know that everything in them that was good is now full and complete... and that everything in them that was not as good is now gone. Every flaw, every failing -- they are, as scripture says, buried in the deepest ocean, forgiven and forgotten by the eternal heart of God. It is as if those imperfect things never existed at all, and all that remains is the very best of that person -- all the things that we loved and cherished.

This happy vision -- this idea that there will be a time for each and every one of us when God will wipe every tear from our eyes, when death will be no more, when mourning and crying and pain will be no more... and the idea that our loved ones who have already gone to be with God are now experiencing the sweetness of this great gift -- is so strong, and so good, and so comforting, that it may even soften our view of death, at least a little, in the here and now. I once heard a story about a little girl who, every day as she walked to

school, had to pass by an old cemetery. Other kids were spooked by that graveyard. When they passed it, they held their breath and walked as fast as they could. But this little girl didn't seem to mind it. To her, the cemetery was more peaceful than scary, with its green grass and tall graceful oaks. Every now and then, she would do something that none of the other kids in her grade would dream of – if she was in a hurry, she would cut the corner and take a shortcut right through the cemetery. One day near Halloween, one of her classmates asked her straight up, “Aren't you frightened to go across that spooky graveyard?”

Without a second thought the little girl responded, “Not at all. It's just something I have to cross to go home.”

In every life, there is suffering. In fact, somewhere right now, in more than one hospital, I expect that the cries of a little child are echoing through the hallways. Those same kinds of cries are being heard in so many places where children are in pain -- in Haiti... in Afghanistan... in Syria and Somalia... along the southern border of the United States. In this mortal life, there is so much that we cannot control... so much loss that we cannot prevent... so many tears that we cannot stop from falling. And, in the end, we will all die. But the news that is good for all the saints is that there will be a time when we'll get across the story seas of life... and when we get there, we will find that those things that were so scary and so painful are not just quiet, but *gone*... that mourning and pain are no more, that every tear has been wiped from our eyes, and we will be at home.

Thanks be to God. ***Amen.***