

Funeral Sermon for Elizabeth Mary Juhasz
A Sermon by Pastor Peter A. Schiebel

June 20, 2006
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Mount Rainier, Maryland

Words of Comfort, Peace, and Hope

Readings Appointed

(Isaiah 40:28-31; 2 Timothy 4:6-8; John 10:7-11,14-15, 27-29)

We are gathered together this evening to celebrate the life of one who is indeed dear to many of us. We celebrate a dear daughter and sister. We celebrate a loving granddaughter and relative. We celebrate one who became a great friend to many. And above all, we celebrate the life of one who bore that most precious of names—child of God.

Yet, as we gather, we come with very heavy hearts, knowing that in our estimation of things, we are celebrating a life which was cut way too short. In our minds, we must all be saying in one way or another that we shouldn't have to be doing this today. Yes, we knew that Liz was ill, but she seemed to turn the corner of her illness every time. Why then did she not make it this time? Unfortunately, the answer to that question is not mine to give.

But what is mine to give are some words which the Lord wishes to speak to our grieving hearts as we look to the life that our dear Liz has with her loving Lord. These words may not answer all of the questions that are filling our hearts and minds this night. But, what the Lord does seek to do for us in this sacred moment is to bestow upon our restless hearts His great gifts of comfort and of peace.

In the quiet of the moments that filled my drive home from Johns Hopkins last Wednesday, the words of Scripture filled my head as I began to think about this particular sermon that I had to preach tonight. Passages just seemed to leap into my mind; words that I believe the Lord brought to my mind as a way to bring me some peace and which I believe could help all of us to look at Liz's life from God's perspective.

The Scriptures that we have heard this evening are in many ways reflective of Liz. Eight years ago, I had the joyful privilege of being the Pastor who confirmed Liz at this very altar. As is part of our Lutheran Confirmation customs, I would choose for each confirmand a Scripture passage which I thought was reflective of them and would sort of become a "motto" for them in the years to come. Rona spoke to me before Confirmation Day and asked on Liz's behalf if it would be possible for me to give Liz as her Confirmation Text the words of Isaiah 40:31. I was told that Liz loved this passage, especially since it is the theme verse of her Day School *alma mater*, Ascension Lutheran School, the home of the Eagles.

Now, since this particular verse is my own Confirmation Text, at that time I guess I wasn't ready to share it with someone else. And looking back at that moment, I think I now wish I had given this verse to Liz. However, I also know that Liz, whether or not she had these words as a Confirmation Text, she still lived them anyway, especially during these last three years.

When Liz was diagnosed with Pulmonary Hypertension, she and her loved ones had many a talk with the Lord. We all asked our “whys” of Him. We all wanted to know “why her” and “why now”. And unfortunately for us, it seemed as if we all didn’t hear the answer that we wanted to hear. But, in this moment, if we would hear it, God is speaking His answer still:

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

Even in the most stressful of moments of both body and soul, the God who claimed Liz to be His very own never let her out of His loving grasp. We know that this illness—a sign of our sinful and broken world—came into Liz’s life and took its toll on her and on those around her. And yet, this illness, which seemed to have triumphed over her, in truth brought her to the victory which her loving God had prepared for her.

Yes, this illness took our dear Liz from us. Yet, our loving God held Liz in His protecting care all the while through those days. He gave Liz the strength that she needed to carry on. Liz was no quitter. And God gave her everything that she needed for her to soar above every obstacle that was placed before her. In many ways, Liz’s life became a testament to the power of God that was indeed at work in her.

Liz knew that the Lord Himself was her Helper and her Strength. She knew that He was leading her still by the hand and was not letting go of her. In my last time of prayer with Liz, a time which had us both in tears, we commended Liz’s life into the care of our Creator, knowing that His will would be done, whatever that might be. We had no idea how soon He would give His answer, but we were hopeful that His answer would be for the best.

Like Saint Paul in our Epistle reading, Liz ran “the good race” and fought “the good fight”. These athletic terms fit so well for one who spent her life in a very active way. Whether it was the basketball court, or the soccer field, or the learning of karate, or just playing around with family or friends, Liz ran many a race and competed for many a prize. And in the final race of her life, she fought with all of her heart and with all of her strength until the Lord told her, “Liz, you can stop racing now. You’ve come home. Take that rest which you deserve.”

Our dear Liz has that rest and she now wears that crown of victory which has been set aside in heaven for her. She has triumphed with the Lord she so faithfully followed in this life and now dwells in that eternal life which has been prepared for her by the Good Shepherd who led her through this vale of tears and carried her into the loving embrace of the Heavenly Father who has welcomed her home.

Our Good Shepherd Jesus Christ made a great promise to those who are His own: "I came that they might have life and have it abundantly." These words of Jesus may strike us a bit strange as we recall Liz's life—a life that was filled at its end with some trial and suffering and cut off all too soon. And yet, from God's perspective, Liz's life was still and *is* still an abundant life. For our dear Liz lived in the knowledge that she was a child of God, that she lived in His care, and that nothing would ever separate her from the love of God that was hers because of Christ Jesus her Lord. This dear, precious lamb of the Good Shepherd's flock has been carried home, through the door of that eternal sheepfold, and given the true abundant life that belongs to God's children.

And so, for us who are still left here, mourning a great loss for us, grieving with hearts that are wracked with pain, the Good Shepherd still speaks to each of us. He calls us to come to Him, the One who gives us His life, who forgives our sins, who heals our hearts, minds, and lives, and who blesses each of us and all of our days with the knowledge that we are His own, that we are never alone, and that He will always keep us. We know that God kept all of these precious promises to our dear Liz, and God will indeed keep these promises to each of us whom He has also called by name and made His own forever.

Our dear Liz was always right where she belonged—in the loving hands of her loving God. It is in those very same hands that we belong as well. As we commit Liz into the Lord's hands until the Day of Resurrection, may we also commit ourselves to those same strong, loving and wise hands as well, that we may ever find our rest and peace in the love of God. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen!

For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

2 Corinthians 4:5-18 (ESV)

*Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat ei.
Anima eius, et animae omnium fidelium defunctorum, per misericordiam Dei requiescant in pace.*