

May 14, 2017
Fifth Sunday of Easter and Celebration of the Life of Marj Robison
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Acts 7:55-60
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16
1 Peter 2:2-10
John 14:1-14

Talking about death is uniquely difficult in our culture, a culture that is in many ways death-defying and death-denying. It's as if we think death is contagious: we risk catching it if we touch it, even if only with words. Because we don't want to talk about death, we avoid planning for our own. Because we find it hard to talk about death, we avoid those who are grieving. And sometimes, because death's power over us frightens us, we try to play games with it.

Maybe you remember what once a popular saying: "He who dies with the most toys wins." Uttered by Mark Twain or Will Rogers, it would have been satire poked at the wealthy. But neither of them said it. Instead, it's attributed to Malcolm Forbes, publisher of *Forbes* magazine, a man who acted as if he believed it. According to Wikipedia, Forbes was known "for an extravagant lifestyle, spending on parties, travel, and his collection of homes, yachts, aircraft, art, motorcycles, and Fabergé eggs."¹

While doing research for this sermon, I happened upon the website for a Lutheran men's group educational program. The title: "He who dies with the most toys ... still dies."² That's correct: regardless of how many toys he accumulated, regardless of whether he "won," Malcolm Forbes died in 1990. I think we know that winning isn't about collecting toys and also that life isn't about winning. But Forbes may have been correct about one thing: every person *should* live their life in the light of its inevitable endpoint. I'll return to that shortly.

Today's Gospel reading takes place on the day we observe as Maundy Thursday, the day before Good Friday. Jesus has just shared with the disciples the Last Supper, during which he washed their feet and spoke of betrayal and denial. Jesus knows he's going to be arrested; he knows he's going to die. He has this last chance to tell the disciples everything they need to know. By the time he's finished, he has delivered a lecture that is rambling yet cohesive, filled with metaphysics and metaphor. It lasts four chapters, a sizeable chunk of the Gospel of John. It's the first-century version of an end-of-life TED talk, and it begins with this: "Do not let your hearts be troubled."

That this is easier said than done is evidenced five sentences later by a cameo appearance of our patron, the apostle Thomas. Not yet a saint, he is the regular guy who, as Carolyn Sharp preached three weeks ago, is brave enough to say what he is thinking about the supposedly resurrected Jesus. Rewind ten days, and Thomas-the-Doubter, aka Thomas-the-Brave, aka Thomas-the-Worrier, interrupts Jesus, exposing a heart that is most certainly troubled. "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

It's a question that we are still asking. As we begin to explore it, let's talk about Marjorie Anita Elbert Robison.

Let me begin by saying that Marj was no Malcolm Forbes—far from it. As Gary put it, “I’m cheap, but not as cheap as Marj.” Despite what Gary says, I don’t think they’re cheap; I think they have their priorities right, and that people know it. Marj was not a collector of toys, but she was a magnet for appreciation. She had a gravitational center that drew me to her from the time of our first meeting. I think you know what I mean. This is the interactive part of the sermon: I invite you to shout out a quality of Marj that you appreciate. [*Wait.*] On my list is kind, calm, peaceful, steady, present, settled, confident, generous, easygoing, etc., etc., etc.

The love and affection between Marj and Gary was always evident—it always felt like they were “together.” Gary says it was that way from the beginning—almost. Their first date was very nearly their last, because neither of them was particularly impressed with the other. Some time later, Gary had a pair of tickets to a show, and every potential date turned him down. Last on his list was Marj. He unenthusiastically asked her, and she unenthusiastically accepted. The second date was the charm, and they’ve been happily together for the five decades since.

A woman of great faith, Marj was a cradle “big tent” Episcopalian, though she and Gary spent time in other Christian denominations. An educator who loved to teach, Marj’s commitment to St. Thomas’s for many years included involvement with the Day School. Marj’s faith, and Gary’s, too, was most evident to me after she fell ill last year. Her diagnosis of lymphoma came with so-so odds. Marj and Gary were concerned about the travails ahead, but they never seemed to lose faith in God’s continuing love and presence. They didn’t welcome death, but neither did they seem to fear it. Instead, they expressed gratitude for the many happy years they had shared.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled.” “How can we know the way?”

In saying what he’s thinking, Thomas gives voice to concerns we still have today. In responding, Jesus offers answers we might still find useful today. Jesus is rambling and long-winded, but I want to highlight two particular takeaways from his TED talk: first, we *already* have the gift of eternal life; and second, our charge is to love. We’ve heard this before. And yet, while we may “know” these things, I’m not sure we really *know* them. We have the gift of eternal life; our charge is to love. I want to be clear that I hear in this, not rules for avoiding death, but rather essentials for embracing life. These two truths play off each other: confidence in the gift of eternal life nudges us to acts of generous love; acts of generous love increase our confidence in eternal life.

Toys aside, this has nothing to do with self-aggrandizement, though there are benefits. It seems to me that, if we participate in the dance between faith and love, the boundary between life and death seems less like a steel wall and more like a gentle stream, a stream over which we repeatedly cross back and forth. As time goes by we comprehend more and more deeply that death is not an end but is instead a particularly important step on the path of life, one that lies at the nexus between the temporal and the eternal. And, paradoxically, the less we fear death, the more we can embrace life—not a life of meaningless excess, but a life of meaningful love.

I've been pondering Marj and her marriage to Gary pretty intently over the twelve days since she died. In her youth, Marj spent hours swimming in the waters of Long Island Sound. I can't imagine Marj restricted in a swimming pool. But I can imagine her in the Sound, taking long, confident, deliberate strokes—not flashy or fast, but steady and ready for the long run. Maybe I'm just making that up, because it's a good metaphor for how she lived her life. Her partnership with Gary wasn't a flash fire that quickly spent itself; rather, it was a core of simmering and shimmering embers that proved long-lasting and life-giving.

It's telling that, instead of vacations, Marj and Gary liked to go on "adventures." Gary says that's because vacations can go wrong, but adventures are always adventures. I'll add that adventures are less about perfection and more about surprise. It seems to me that successful adventures require a bedrock of trust, topped by easygoing good humor—topped by ice cream. That's not a bad recipe for relationships and life in general.

It is still the season of Easter, the season of resurrection and alleluias. As the blurb on the front page of your bulletin notes, the burial liturgy is an Easter liturgy. Observing Marj's burial rites during this Sunday service seems especially fit. It's a new thing for us, this Sunday morning burial. But it's not significantly different from the Sunday morning marriage that was joyfully celebrated here a few years ago. Baptisms are now held on Sunday mornings in recognition that the sacramental work of the church should be carried out in the fullness of the assembled community. There is no better way to celebrate Marj's life—or to face our own grief—than in the midst of this fully assembled community.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled." "How can we know the way?" "I am the way, the truth, and the life." So often Jesus' words are read with a harsh tone. In this case, as he says goodbye to his beloveds, I don't know why he would need to be harsh. His words aren't a requirement or a test. I hear his words not as roadblock, but as a comfort. The way of Jesus is the way of eternal life, *and* the way of life here and now. We remember that as we remember Marj and acknowledge her witness to that Good News. Today we celebrate Marj's life, giving thanks for the gift of her time with us. And we commend her back to her creator, in the promise of her eternal life in the fullness of God's love.

Notes

¹ "Malcolm Forbes," Wikipedia, available online at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malcolm_Forbes (accessed May 13, 2017).

² Tim Radkey, "He Who Dies With the Most Toys ... Still Dies," on the Men's Network page of the Lutheran Hour Ministries, available online at, <https://www.lhm.org/men/studydetail.asp?id=10633> (accessed May 13, 2017).