

Sermon for the funeral of Mark Heffron
February 22, 2020
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
The Rev. Ian Burch

Good morning, and welcome to St. Mark's Episcopal Church. Many of you are members here and are familiar with gathering in this sanctuary for joys and for sorrows. For those of you new to this space, you are most welcome here — to share in the blessings of God even in the midst of our deep pain. A core Christian belief is that the Holy Spirit gathers us together. And I see that power at work this morning; we are gathered here in the heart of Almighty God, our strength and our consolation.

The first line of today's Gospel lesson is "Do not let your hearts be troubled." And I find this a difficult word to hear this morning. Because my heart is very much troubled. I am sad and confused that a good man has died too young. I find Mark's death to be like a tear in a fabric, or like chaos thrown into a reasonably ordered life. So, my heart is troubled this morning. It is deeply troubled.

When Jayne and I were talking about possible readings for this funeral — a conversation that I hoped would be decades in the future — I had quipped that the reading about God's house having many dwelling places would be appropriate for a talented architecture photographer. I had thought it was a good reading because of the natural affinity Mark had for buildings, but I'll admit now that it is speaking to me in an entirely different way.

These words of Jesus are often read at funerals because Christians for millennia have found comfort in the idea that there are many different places to exist with our God. And we have found comfort that there are places prepared for us. This scripture has, for countless millions of people over time, been a comfort — to hear that the creator of all things has the time and the inclination to prepare a specific place for you and, by extensions, the ones you love. The concept is a comfort and a balm during difficult times.

I've known Mark for four years, and I can say with absolute confidence that I have never known a person who embodied the welcome of God more in his spirit. I am not exaggerating when I say that 90% of newcomers to St. Mark's in the last four years have some kind of Mark story to share. He had this perfect ability to invite a person for a cup of coffee. This might not sound like much of a superpower, but it really will change the world. As the church would grow, Mark would stand in the back, just beaming that so many people had found their way into St. Mark's. When we had a particularly large count on a Sunday morning, Mark would whisper the number in my ear with glee that people were connecting to this place.

And so, when the Gospel talks about a place being prepared for us, I have to think that this is a slice of God's power that lived in Mark's heart. What on earth are we going to do without him?

It's been my experience that words of comfort are not always so comforting in the moment. I believe they grow, slowly, like a stubborn flower in the desert. And the comfort today is that a

place is prepared by God for Mark. Just as he has seen to the comfort of countless of us in his life, so is the repose of his soul into the everlasting love of God assured to us in the words of the scriptures. The comfort might not take root today, but I believe it will, and I believe the day will come when the Lord will transform our mourning.

Mark was incredibly generous to the church with his art. A tiny shop like ours would never have had the resources to have our spaces photographed with such excellence. And Mark would just pop into the office periodically with some amazing photos of our buildings or our people. One of which he was particularly proud was of the Resurrection window at the back of the nave. On your way out today, take a moment to look at it in all its power. It depicts a resurrected Jesus breaking out of the grave. This is a core tenet of Christian belief — that in the mysterious power of God, death is not the last answer to the question of existence. We live and move and have our being under the promise of that window. It is hope in the midst of despair; it is comfort in sadness; it is life in death. That is the radical claim of the Christian life, and we are audacious to proclaim it even on a day like today.

Mark showed us a slice of God's love. I know something more about the way that God loves me because of the way Mark loved me. And I imagine this is true of most of us in this room. He was a vessel for the radical hospitality in the scriptures, and his absence leaves a Mark-shaped hole in our family, in our community, in our church. I know my heart will find comfort and consolation, but I think that day is a ways off. My faith knows there is comfort in God, but my heart hasn't quite caught up yet.

We know that death is not the last thing. And we know that a gracious God prepares space for each of us with the same kind of divine hospitality that we were able to experience in Mark's life. That doesn't mean there aren't tears. That doesn't mean that there aren't questions. And that doesn't mean that we do not need to powerfully lean on the people gathered here for succor. We have lost a wonderful man, and it is right that our faces are wet. They will be for a long time.

And when we are ready to see it, the promise etched in the glass of the resurrection, the promise that life has that last word even when death hangs over the room, that promise is waiting for us, frozen in the image of Jesus breaking out of the grave — an image that exemplifies how I will remember Mark's art. When I walk under that window, I will try to see it with Mark's eyes, see Jesus raise his hand in a silent benediction, blessing me, blessing Mark's family, and blessing this community that meant everything to Mark. And in the days to come, when grief and darkness cling so closely, I will remind myself and remind all of you of the promise of life that our ancestors painstakingly created in that glass — the promise that death is not the end, and that a place has been prepared for us. "Do not let your hearts be troubled; Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places...I am the way, the truth, and the life." Amen.