

Funeral Homily Joan Kuehl
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Christian hope is a strange creature. It is not quite the same kind of hope that we have when we are kids. We hope that Santa will bring a favorite toy, or we hope that we will get the fourth grade teacher that we really like.

Instead, Christian hope looks into the deep realities of life and death and decides to choose love, joy, and life even in the midst of the nearly unbearable sadness of real loss. This hope is brought to my mind every year in our memorial garden on Easter Sunday. I watch children playing on the grass looking for eggs filled with candy while wearing their Sunday best. And even as they play, I know that they are beginning their lives amidst the ashes of the generations who have gone before. Nowhere is the bittersweetness of life more clear to me than on Easter morning, when we proclaim that death is not the final answer while also remembering those saints who have died and who we miss. Christian hope is robust and unflinching. Christian hope knows how sad we all are today that Joan is not with us to share her wisdom, her faith, her love, and her quiet power.

I really love Joan. And I can't exactly put my finger on why. I just liked her the moment we met when she and David so kindly invited me over to dinner almost seven years ago. I felt her intelligence, her deep faith, her open mind, and her love of family and community. It was really hard to be around her and not be charmed by her quiet humor. I never saw her in action at work, but I can't imagine she suffered any fools gladly.

The family has chosen one of the most beautiful passages in all of scripture to help us in our grief today. In it, the prophet Isaiah paints a picture of what God's answer to death is. Imagine a mountain where people past, present, and future sit together at a feast. Imagine the rich and the poor together. Imagine enemies putting down weapons to sit and share bread and wine. Imagine the saints from every tribe and people and nation—all sitting in peace after having laid down their burdens. This is the kind of hope that our ancestors have passed on to us. And I believe this is the kind of hope that Joan's faith provided for her throughout her life.

And so, I wonder how we Christian people are supposed to get through tomorrow, after the service is over, knowing that Joan is laid to rest in St. Mark's courtyard. How on earth are we supposed to feel the great loss of a wonderful woman while also claiming the Christian hope that is our birthright as God's people?

Some days I am better at it than others, and perhaps you are too. Sometimes I find myself so broken by my grief that the idea of a heavenly banquet makes no sense. I want to scream to God:

I am hurting right now. I miss my wife, my mother, my sister, my friend. I don't want to think about that banquet. I want to rail against cancer and against a life taken too soon.

And then other times, I am able to access the kind of faith that I sense Joan possessed. Sometimes, I am able to see glimpses of hope and joy in the midst of pain. I can see the way that Joan lives in the lives and countenance of her daughters. I think about the rippling impact that her vocation in education continues to have on teachers and students in southeast Wisconsin. I see the different ways that her Christian values were lived out in her professional and personal life, and I cannot help but feel my grief lessened knowing that she was a servant of God and that the world has been enriched by her presence. So, yes, there are times when I can feel the grace and the joy of God's heavenly banquet. Not always, But sometimes.

And that is my hope for you. That there will be days in your grief when the God's hope will break into your mourning and offer you a glimpse of Christian hope. That now and again, the gift of Joan's life will live in your heart alongside the grief. I know that is a lot to pray for on a day like today, but I believe that is the message of Isaiah. Perhaps today is not the day for feasting and dancing, but the prophet promises that one day we will feast again, one day we will laugh again, and one day we will share a table with Joan and with all the saints who have gone before. I will think of Joan often in these next months, but I will especially think of her next Easter Sunday, when the children once again laugh and play in our courtyard, knowing that death is not the end of her story. Amen.