

2018 Susquehanna Annual Conference
Celebration of Life and Resurrection Service Sermon
– by Rev. Marian Hartman
May 31, 2018

It's an honor and a privilege for me to stand before these family members of those whom we honor tonight. Because first and foremost, tonight is about remembering. Remembering the lives of those who have served the church in different ways. Those who served as pastors and spouses, conference staff, lay members.

Undoubtedly you, as family, loved them and supported them in the way that they served. And we thank you, because we know that you made sacrifices. I am sure there were those phone calls that disrupted dinner, and plans that were made and had to be changed because of something happening. And so we thank you for the love and the support that you gave to your loved ones.

We come also to remember that we are one with Christ. Earlier today we said the words of the Apostles Creed. We said I believe in the communion of saints. Took me a long time to figure out what that meant. The communion of saints. As a child, I pictured a whole bunch of people with wings and halos sitting around drinking little cups of grape juice. You know, that's kind of a communion of saints that a child thinks about.

But the communion of saints says that we are one with Christ whether we lived yesterday, today, tomorrow, or all the tomorrows after that. We are here today because some saints, going all the way back to saints like Peter and Mary Magdalene and the Apostle Paul, and Lydia. Saints like John Wesley, Sojourner Truth, Harry Hoosier, Bishop Park. Yeah, he's a saint. We're saints. Oh, I don't have a capital "S" saint by my name, believe me. But those who are part of Christ are saints. And your loved ones are saints that helped shape our lives.

They say confession is good for the soul, and I am going to confess this evening.

We won't say how many years ago, but when I was a young seminary student, and attended my first Annual Conference, the first experience I had was this Memorial Service. And I sat there scratching my head. My family didn't do death very well at all. When someone in my family died, we had a memorial service with just the family, and then we didn't talk about that person anymore. And I thought that's the way the whole world did death. But over the years I have come to appreciate this service.

It helped as I began to know some of the names. In those early years I didn't know any of those people that died. But tonight as I listened to the names, smiles came to my face as I heard the names of pastors in my district. Colleagues, friends, pioneers who paved the way for women in ministry.

It's important that we remember we are connected with each other, because we are connected with Christ. I have no doubt that sitting among us tonight, both clergy and laity, there are others

among us who are grieving the loss of family members. Of mentors and friends. People who helped shape your Christian life.

If someone had not proclaimed the Word to us, how would we hear? We have the written Scripture, but how much more alive it comes when someone shares with us what God has done in their life. And that's what your loved ones have done. Some of them proclaimed it from the pulpit. Some of them proclaimed it as they baked pies and cakes. And if I may take a moment, there was one very special lay member of Annual Conference, Jim Smailes, who was my parsonage guy. He took care of my parsonage. And anytime I needed him, I called him up, and he was there. He served God with screwdrivers and hammers and paintbrushes. You see, we are one in Christ.

You may have heard the poem, and I didn't memorize it, but it talks about the "dash." On your tombstone, 1953 [dash] whatever. And the year you were born and the year you die really don't mean a whole lot, it's that dash in the middle that makes the difference. What do you do with your "dash"?

You see, if we're one with Christ, and we have been touched by those who have gone before us, the job now comes to us. It's our turn to share the good news of Jesus Christ so that the next generation is not lost. I don't want the church to die on my watch. God won't let it. I believe that. But God needs you and I to make it happen.

So what will your legacy be? How are you living your life as a follower of Christ so that others will know and come to love Jesus? It's not always easy.

The message doesn't change, but the way we present the message sometimes needs to change. If we never changed music in the church, we might still be singing Gregorian chants. And I'm sorry, that is not my favorite genre. We may have to package the gospel in some new ways to reach new people in new places.

The church met in catacombs and homes and fields. John Wesley preached from atop a tombstone, and outside the mines. There is a generation, more than one generation, out there who need to hear the good news of Jesus Christ, so that there will be more and more who become one with Christ today and into the future.

It's our job to go to heaven and to take as many people along with us as we can. Paul said for me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. I'm torn between the two, what do I do? I want to go be with Christ because that's better, but I know you need me here. And if I remain, there will be fruitful labor. I like that line. If I remain I know that it will bear fruit for you.

Sometimes we get to the point of saying, what can I do? I am old. I don't have much influence. I don't have all those gifts that other people have. Do me a favor, take two fingers, put it right here. Yeah, you got a pulse? You're alive? God's got something for you to do. God always has something for you to do.

When we lose someone we love, we experience grief. But we don't grieve as those who have no hope. Doesn't say we don't grieve, because grief is real. But in our grief, we have hope. We have hope that we will be one with Christ yesterday, today, and forever.

I remember a sermon preached by Rev. Jody Link. She preached the Memorial Service the year her husband died in the early days of the AIDS epidemic. And I remember that she said grief is so high, you can't get over it; so low, you can't under it; so wide, you can't get around it; you gotta go through it. I never knew how much those words would affect my life. I have no idea why I remember that particular sermon or why I remember that that's what she said.

Fourteen years ago this past week, I lost my son in a car accident. And that was when all the things I had been saying to people all these years about death and grief, I had to figure out if they were real for myself. Did I have that hope? And Jody's words came back to me. And she was right, you can't get over it, you can't get under it, you can't get around it, but you can get through it. Because unlike the way my family did death when I was a kid, I learned that if we do death together, if in death we remember that we are one with Christ, we have such support to carry us through. We cannot be a Christian alone. We cannot be a Christian isolated from others.

Paul says for me to live is Christ. It's to know that we are one with each other in Christ. We put off the old self and put on the new. We do help and love and support and carry each other because of the love we have in Christ Jesus. And so the hope we have, the hope we offer, the hope we share, is that we will be one with Christ forever, with all those who've gone before us.

And I gotta tell ya', Jesus and I have had a couple of conversations about this. I'm telling you, I want to go to heaven and see Jesus, but I want my boy standing right beside him, because that's who I want to see. We no longer have those loved ones in our lives here, but they are not gone. They are not gone from us, because we are one with Christ yesterday, today, and forever.

I want to close with a little story. And some of you have probably read it on Facebook, but I like the way I tell it. There was a woman who was given the diagnosis from her doctor that she had not long to live. So she called for the pastor to come over. And the pastor comes and is offering words of comfort and assurance. And she said, pastor, ease up. I'm dying. I'm going to heaven. I'm good with that. He said oh, OK. Why did you ask me to come over? And this woman said, well, because I want you to do something for me. And people are going to ask, so you are going to have to be able to explain it. When I die and they put me in that coffin, I want you to make sure that I have a Bible in one hand and a fork in the other. And when they say what's she doing with a fork in her hand, you're going to say this: I love coming to worship. I've loved serving the Lord, carrying his Word to the children in VBS and at the food pantry and in service and in all the places I was. But the thing I liked best about our church was our fellowship dinners. And the part of the dinner I liked best, was when they came around and cleared the plates and said but keep your fork. Because you know, when you keep your fork, you're not getting Jello. You are getting the good stuff. You need a fork for cake with gooey icing or pie, (like the pie I might get in my face if you all put enough money in my jar out there). She said tell them that I held onto my fork because I know the best is yet to come.

That is the faith we proclaim. We are one with Christ and the best is yet to come. To live is Christ; to die is gain. So whether I live or whether I die, whether you live or whether you die, we belong to Christ and to each other.

Thanks be to God. Amen.