

*A sermon given on Easter Sunday, April 24, 2011  
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,  
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

### *Your Second Life*

Do you know about the Six-Word Memoir Project? It all started with an enduring legend about Ernest Hemingway. Allegedly he was challenged to write a meaningful story in only six words. So he did: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.” Poignant, evocative, just six words. Recently a literary project began asking readers for their own Six-Word Memoirs. It has become a blogging phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> Some of these six-word formulations are philosophical one-liners: “Marry the positive; divorce the negative.” “My bucket list kicked me back.” “Multi-tasking is making several mistakes simultaneously.”

Others focus on a particular theme. In a recent series on the topic of Hope, for instance, someone wrote: “Really hope my son calls today.” And, for this coming week in particular: “Hope Kate fares better than Diana.”

Most interesting of all are those which actually attempt to respond to the memoir challenge: *Can you sum up your life in six words?* Here we get the wistful: “Analog man in a digital world.” Or the regretful: “Wedding dress lasted longer than husband.” Or the poignant: “Mom’s Alzheimer’s. She forgets. I remember.” Or the tender: “I still make coffee for two.” The journalist Gloria Steinem summarized: “Life is one big editorial meeting.” And the 6-Word Memoir by chef Mario Batali is: “Brought it to a boil often.”

So, here is your task for today – your conversational challenge for the Easter dinner table. Can you sum up your life in six words? What would you choose to highlight? What matters most? How will you characterize the life you are living? Or the life for which you hope?

Fifteen years ago a colleague of mine in the Diocese of Western Massachusetts suffered a brain aneurysm. There she was, standing at the altar celebrating the eucharist, when the aneurysm ruptured. The congregation was shocked, the paramedics were called, earnest prayers were offered. And, by the grace of God, Jenni survived. The story circulated that the congregation wanted to replace the chasuble which she had been wearing and which the EMT’s had cut from bottom to top when removing her from the chancel. But, according to the tale, the priest continued to wear it at the altar, crudely stitched back up, as a visible sign of the fragility of life.

I never heard Jenni say whether the chasuble story was true, but I did hear her testify to the way the experience changed her life. It focused her, she said, on significant things. She spent more time with the people who mattered to her most. It freed her to say No to a lot of things. She refused to drive two hours each way for some long diocesan meeting that held little prospect for significance. She had little patience for anything that seemed a waste of time. This wasn’t a question of maximum productivity at every moment – she might spend hours putting in the garden. It was, rather, a question of meaning, enjoyment, and gratitude. She wanted to use her renewed life for things that expressed significance, or joy, or thanksgiving.

Like the exercise of the 6-word memoir, Jenni’s near-death experience was a moment which engendered focus and choice and selective meaning. It got her attention! And it gave her a second life.

*As the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord ... came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ... For fear of him the guards shook... But the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.’ [Mt 28:1-4]*

In the realm of attention-getting, an earthquake is pretty good. An earthquake, *and* an angel. We can fairly bet that God captured the attention of these women. And the disciples, who were met by the

risen Christ shortly thereafter – he got their attention, too. A dead man risen is liable to do that. He got their attention – and he gave them a second life. Which they needed. They needed a second life. For in a manner of speaking, Jesus was not the only one who had been in a tomb those past two days.

Grief is a kind of tomb, surely. If you have been deep in grief, you know what I mean. Grief is as deep and dark and solitary as any tomb of stone. The women named Mary were in such a tomb. What was there to do but keep vigil and mourn?

Confusion is a kind of tomb as well. You can't see where you are, where you came from, where you're headed. Caught in the dusk of uncertainty, no direction is clear. The disciples were in such a tomb. This had not been the plan. This was not what they expected. What was there to do but lock the doors?

Regret is another tomb, is it not? An inward focus on failures and irretrievable moments. Regret, and its cousin remorse, do not allow us to move forward because they fix us in the past. Peter was in such a tomb. He had failed his friend. Once, twice, three times he had missed his chance to be loyal and courageous. What was there to do but weep bitterly?

The story of Easter morning is not just the account of one man's Resurrection from the Tomb. It is that, to be sure. "He is not here, for he has been raised!" said the messenger. And so he had. But he was not the only one. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, who ran to tell the others – they also were raised, delivered from their tomb of grief. And the disciples, who joyously fell upon the feet of the risen Christ and worshipped him – they also were raised, delivered from their tomb of confusion and fear. And Peter, who went on to become the rock-solid leader of the early church – he also was raised, delivered from his tomb of regret.

Peter and Mary and Thomas and John ... every one of them was given a second life that day. The grief-stricken were consoled. The remorseful were forgiven. The confused given direction, the fearful given courage. Their lives from that day forward were not perfect, were not placid, were not painless. But they were faithful and grateful and generous. Inside their tombs, they were as good as dead. Now, they were given a second life.

So, what of us? What of you and me? Must we suffer a brain aneurysm, or be shaken by an earthquake, or visited by an angel? May God not have our attention until then? Or might we yet be reminded by the simple glory of this, our own Easter morning? Can we feel our own life tremble beneath our feet, and in our mind's eye catch a glimpse of the Risen Christ – who says to us, as he said to the disciples, and has said ever since, "Greetings! Do not be afraid!"

What is the tomb which encloses you? Grief? Confusion? Fear? Regret? No tomb is too deep for the love of God to reach you. No tomb is too dark for the Light of Christ to illumine your way. A second life is yours to claim. As people of the Tomb, we are uncertain, and afraid, and weary – and thus also selfish, and grudging, and wary. But as Easter people we are forgiven, and loved, and trusting – and thus also tolerant, and generous, and courageous.

Dear sisters and brothers: What will you do, outside of the tomb? What will you do with your second life? And what will your own 6-word Memoir be? What will comprise your carefully-chosen six words? For today, let it be this:

Alleluia! Christ is risen! Risen, indeed!

Or, perhaps this:

Easter morning, life begins, for you!

In the Name of the Risen Christ. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Find it at [www.smithmag.net](http://www.smithmag.net).