

Third Sunday of Easter

A few years ago some of my family changed planes in Chicago before a transatlantic flight. My brother Tom was looking forward to the vacation, but not to the flight. He doesn't sleep well on planes, and a trip to Europe meant he would surely lose an entire night's sleep. In the gate area at O'Hare he saw a man reading a book entitled, *How to Stop Snoring*. Tom was glad he was not the only one with sleep issues. He boarded the plane, fastened his seatbelt, and braced himself for a long night, when, sure enough, the man reading that book took the seat right next to him. Upon arriving in Europe, Tom told us, "The book didn't do that guy any good."

A good night's sleep is a wonderful gift. People lose sleep over a variety of issues - stress, health, children, noise, or concerns about work or school. If you can sleep well, it usually indicates you're in a place of trust and contentment, when you can relax and let the cares of the day drift away.

Psalm 4 is a prayer of trust in God. It concludes with a reference to a good night's sleep. In today's responsorial psalm, we heard the cantor sing, "In peace I will lie down and fall asleep, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety." The person who first sang this psalm felt safe and secure, attributing these feelings to the protection of God and God alone. We can only envy how this person experienced almost simultaneously lying down and falling asleep. The Catholic Church includes Psalm 4 every week in its Liturgy of the Hours. It comes up every Saturday as the first psalm of night prayer.

Not only a lullaby, Psalm 4 is a prophecy. In today's gospel Jesus tells the disciples, "everything written about me in the... psalms must be fulfilled." We can imagine Jesus dying on the cross confidently singing this psalm as a prophecy: "In peace I will lie down and fall asleep, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety." Death is like sleep. Both are transitions. This psalm helps us prepare for dying with the same trust it shows in the simple act of going to bed.

We sang it because today's first reading proclaims resurrection. Peter addresses other Jews and tells them quite simply of Jesus, "The author of life you put to death, but God raised him from the dead; of this we are witnesses." Jesus lay down in death, and God raised him. It sounds as simple as the actions we perform every night and every morning - we lie down in bed, and we wake up again. Letters associated with tombstones make use of this imagery: RIP, *Requiescat in Pace*, or Rest in Peace. Death is not final; it is transitional, like rest. Death resembles sleep, and for us, waking from sleep foreshadows resurrection.

The psalm refrain had us sing, "Lord, let your face shine on us." These words make a good prayer any night before we go to bed because they ask that we may wake again when God shines the light of his face upon us. Beyond the next night, this prayer looks ahead to the end of our days. If ever we feel that death is drawing nigh, this could be our prayer: "In peace I will lie down and fall asleep." "Lord, let your face shine on us." We fall asleep in trust that we will rise again. We pray that when we lie down at last in the bed of the grave, the light that after shines on us will be Christ.

Sunday, April 15, 2018