

Easter VI (RCL Year C)
May 9, 2010

St. Margaret's
Annapolis

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Jean-Dominique Bauby lay completely paralyzed except for one eye. He had suffered a stroke so devastating that the link was broken between the brainstem and the body. The result is called "locked-in syndrome." Bauby was 43, a highly successful editor of the French magazine *Elle*, when he was struck down.

As he resurfaced from the trauma of the stroke, he lay in bed or sat strapped to a wheelchair, watching the world with one wry eye. He became determined to record his observations as a sort of testimony of his life within his cocoon.

A speech therapist sensed in M. Bauby the desire to communicate. She knew of accounts of paralyzed people who have been able to blink once for yes and two for no. When she established that much with him, she introduced him to a special alphabet in which the letters are ordered according to the frequency of their use – in French, of course.

"E-s-a-r-i-n-t-u," she would recite, and he would blink at a particular letter. A word would grow to a sentence, a sentence to a paragraph, until he was compiling bulletins for his friends. From this was born the idea for a book. His editors hired a special freelance editor, Claude Mendibil, to work with him.

Mme. Mendibil patiently repeated the alphabet, watching M. Bauby's left eye for a reaction, slowly recording whole pages that he had memorized in his head before dawn. After two months of painstaking writing, the little book was complete: "The Diving Suit and the Butterfly."

The book, later made into a short film, describes Bauby's discovery of his condition. "In the past it was known as a massive stroke and you simply died. But improved resuscitation techniques have now prolonged and refined the agony," he reflected.

But if his body was trapped, his mind was not, and it could take flight like a butterfly. "There is so much to do," he wrote. "You can wander off in space or in time, set out for Tierra del Fuego or King Midas' court. You can visit [the one] you love. You can build castles... discover Atlantis..."

One day from an ambulance window, he caught a glimpse of a corner café in Paris where he once enjoyed evenings with friends. He shed a tear, but wrote, "I can weep quite discretely. People think my eye is watering." Even in this, he never sunk into self pity or despair.

I tell you this story NOT to invoke guilt for our relative state of blessedness, nor to deny us our feelings about whatever the current condition or circumstance of our lives... only to illustrate two things.

One: that we are, in our own ways, equally locked-in.

- We work too hard.
- We don't travel enough or do the things we long to do, even when they are quite within our reach.
- We are afraid to risk or soar the heights.
- We are too careful.

Of course I'm not suggesting recklessness or irresponsibility. And perhaps, like most preachers, I am speaking only for and to myself. But for the sake of argument, let's consider the possibility, just the possibility, that most of us live in a cocoon of our own making:

- that we choose to remain unconscious and unhealed of those things that hold us back;
- that we nurture old hurts because forgiveness is difficult;
- that we cling to old ideas because change is hard;
- that we settle for what seems safe because we think we can protect ourselves from... life.

We might as well be paralyzed.

We do the same thing to God. We lock God in by creating a god to meet our needs and comfort us, and we are deeply disappointed and offended when we don't get what we want. We construct an image of God that is rigid; that in an odd sort of way is too good, too sentimental, because that's what we think we want God to be.

One afternoon, discussing some difficult text, the late scholar Rabbi Abraham Heschel, pounded his fist on a stack of manuscripts... [and shouted] "God is not nice. He is not an uncle. God is an earthquake!"

As long as we limit ourselves and limit God, we are locked-in.

The second thing I'm trying to illustrate is this: WE LIMIT LOVE.

We don't love God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind. We don't love our neighbor OR ourselves!

- We love as long as we get what we want.
- We love as long as we don't get hurt.
- We love as long as we are loved back.
- We love ourselves as long as we're productive, thin, and have money in the bank.

In fact, love isn't easy to talk about; not really. For one thing, language limits us, what with only one word in the English language to cover so many aspects of what we call love.

The Learning Channel aired a story about a lioness trying to protect her cubs from an advancing buffalo stampede. When the dust settled and the herd had moved away, she

paced across the plain again and again calling for her cubs. But they were gone... trampled by the buffalo.

Love in its basic form isn't what makes us human; not when it is simply biological and shared by so many other creatures. It has to be something else; something more.

It has to be more like a reflection of God's love. Love that doesn't judge. Love that craves the best for the loved one. Love that is forever because it is renewed by forgiveness and reconciliation.

God is not a benevolent uncle, sweetly cajoling and nudging us along. God is *pushing* us to love, and then to love more! God is actively, powerfully, creatively, spectacularly loving us – pouring love into us – so that God's love will overflow from us to the world... the world so in need of love.

"Those who love me will keep my word," Jesus says to us by way of the gospel of John.

And Jesus has told us that he came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill the law; and that law from the Torah was this: to love the Lord our God with all our hearts and minds and souls; and to love our neighbors as our selves. That is, to love our neighbors and to love ourselves.

And Jesus has also given us a new commandment: to love one another as he has loved us. What could be plainer?

Jean-Dominique Bauby's book has sold millions of copies in France and around the world. Two days after its publication, knowing that his book was an instant success, Bauby died of heart failure. Now unlocked. Now free.

God means for us too to be free. But if we are too fearful, too careful, too proper, too reserved in our love, in our loving, then we, like Jean-Dominique, will be locked-in. If, though, we have a little faith – just a little is enough – and Jesus' words find a home in our hearts, then he and God dwell there.

And they will send us the Advocate, the One who is on our side, the Holy Spirit, who will remind us of Jesus' words and will teach us everything we need to know. This, Jesus promises, is his own peace – such peace as the world cannot give. This peace calms our troubled hearts and puts to rest our fears. We are locked-in no longer. We too are free!

An unknown source wrote this:

To love and succeed is the best thing.

To love and fail is the next best thing.

But the very best thing is to fail and keep on loving.

Only the freedom we find in God's love enables us to love like that. Only the experience of failing and finding ourselves still loved by God, enables us to love like that. May we who are so loved find ourselves set free to fail and keep on loving.

Amen.

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