

*Based on John 12:20. Now my soul is troubled.*

According to Phoebe Zerwick, writing this week in *The New York Times*, her mother made an announcement as her breathing became labored on the day before her death in upstate New York:

*I have a new leader*, Phoebe's mother said.

*Who is that?* Phoebe replied.

*Mark*, Phoebe's mother answered. *He's going to take me to the other side.*

Phoebe's mother was speaking of Phoebe's husband, alive and well in their new home of North Carolina, far from New York, emphatically not an angel of death.

*Um, that's great, Mom*, Phoebe gulped. *Except that I need him here with me. Do you think he can do both?*

*Oh, yes*, Phoebe's mom insisted. *He's very capable.*

That night, as Phoebe's mother struggled to breathe, she managed to say, *I'm thinking of the next world, and Mark, who will lead me there.* And her oxygen level dropped ... and dropped ... and dropped ... until she died the next morning.

*My mother was not a brave person in the traditional sense*, Phoebe says. *My mother was afraid of snakes, the subway platform and any hint of pain. But she faced her death, confident that a man who loves her daughter would guide her to whatever lay ahead.* And, in some mystical way, he did.

Any of us who have journeyed with someone through the sacred passage of dying can vouch for the veracity of Phoebe's mother's deathbed vision. It turns out, in fact, at least one research study of hospice patients found an astonishing 88 percent of them reporting at least one similar kind of vision, providing patients and their loved ones with profound meaning and solace.

Dr. Chris Kerr, who led the study, observed the emotional transformation of patients who experience such visions. *I have a better understanding of spiritual matters*, most of them said, whether or not they were particularly religious. *I have changed my priorities about what is important in life.*

This is the heart of the spiritual wisdom Jesus is trying to express in our Lesson today. It is as if he, too, has experienced a deathbed vision of sorts in this his last public teaching in John's Gospel. *Now my soul is troubled*, Jesus admits. *But I will not ask to be rescued from this hour. I know I will be lifted up*, Jesus says. *I have seen it. I will draw all things to myself on the other side of the cross.*

John's Gospel is unique in this way. The other gospels spend pages on the agony of the suffering of Jesus throughout Holy Week. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus sweats blood and begs God to remove this cup from him. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus even cries out from the cross that he has been abandoned by God. In the other Gospels the death of Jesus is agony.

But in John's Gospel just two sentences in all eight chapters of the Holy Week narrative admit to a troubling in the soul of Jesus. In John's Gospel, Jesus has already internalized - in his flesh - the view from eternity. The promise of resurrection strengthens him to endure and to transform the suffering that lies ahead. Indeed, in some mystical sense, in John's Gospel, the promise of resurrection has already healed his wounds, even before those wounds have been inflicted.

And it can do the same for us, Jesus says.

Don't forget, Jesus says, that you and I are like grains of wheat: beautiful and strong and resilient in our own right. But self-contained. And mortal. And fallible. Living in a world of constant change. If we truly want to feed the world, Jesus says, we must surrender to the loss of everything we think we know, everything we think we can count on, everything we think we must have in order to survive. We must die in order to live.

Dr. Kerr says the same thing, from the perspective of scientific research. *The paradox of dying*, he says, is *that while there is physical deterioration, [our patients] are growing and finding meaning. ... Patients are telling us that they are being put back together.* Patients find a deep, pervasive love in dying, Dr. Kerr observes. *Time seems to vanish. There's an absence of fear. Some call that experience enlightenment. Others call it God.*

Jesus, in John's Gospel, calls it the spiritual wisdom of the cross:

We must turn into winter's block of ice, like Frodgie, in order to transform into a spring's new creation; we must sing the truth of the troubling in our soul in order to rest in the rhythm of grace; and we must succumb, like Jesus, to the chaos of crucifixion in order to taste the joy of resurrection.

Let the church say, Amen!