

Mass for All Souls, 2019
St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

He dropped his luggage on the floor, and he started to run.

This happened two Sundays ago. I had flown to Nashville that evening to attend a meeting the next day. It was late, and everyone in the airport looked tired as we waited for our luggage.

When my suitcase finally arrived, I turned around. Then I saw it. A man in a military uniform dropped his luggage onto the ground and he started running. I worried that something was wrong.

As it unfolded, it was one of those moments in life when it felt like time was standing still. Everything seemed to be happening all at once.

Time stood still.

I saw the military man running. Then I saw a woman, running toward him. Next to her were two little girls, each holding a sign which read "Welcome home Daddy."

This was a soldier coming home from deployment.

He ran toward his wife. She ran toward him. One of the girls stumbled.

And even though all of this was happening in an instant, there is one thing about that homecoming that I will never forget. I will never forget the *looks on their faces*. They all had the same expression.

It was the look of absolute bliss, of unfiltered joy. It was the look of a love which had been distanced by danger and duty, now reunited. It was relationships restored. It was passion and powerful patience.

It was *heaven*, beaming on their faces.

And the beaming, blissful looks did not disappear, even as the tears began to roll down their cheeks.

In that moment, as time stood still, I was privileged to witness this homecoming. I wished that I could take a photo and capture the look on their faces.

Then I remembered – I *had* seen a photo of that look! It's a Pulitzer prize-winning photo taken in

1973 at an air force base in California, as an American prisoner of war stepped off a plane from Vietnam. His wife and children were running toward him on the tarmac. Every one of their faces had the same expression – the bliss of reconnection, the gift of reunion, the joy of homecoming.

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In the weeks before my mother died, she and I talked about what would happen after she died. She believed in Jesus, risen and eternal. She believed that she would see him face to face.

She mentioned that, when she was a teacher, one of her students asked her, “What will heaven be like?” And my mom’s answer was something like this. She said:

“I believe heaven will be like the happiness you feel when you come home after a long trip. I believe that heaven will be like seeing your mom or dad after you’ve been away for a while. I believe that heaven will be like the look on a mother’s face when she sees her child for the first time. I believe that heaven will be like a parent who sees their child get off the bus after a long day at school. I believe that heaven will be like seeing your best friend after a long time apart. Heaven will be like the happiness on your face when you think no one is watching. And, in heaven, the happiness never ends.”

In heaven the happiness never ends...

Mom was dead three weeks later. There are still tears when I see her photo there around the altar, just as there are tears as I look at the other faces in those photos, and think of countless more faces whose image is in my mind on a night like this.

My tears, our tears, come from the reality of human grief. The Gospels tell us that Mary and the faithful women who went to the tomb had tears in their eyes. Why? Because they loved Jesus. And as a wise old Protestant preacher once said at a Pennsylvania funeral – “grief is love left over.”

When our loved ones die, our *faith* tells us that they are with the Lord. But our *heart* tells us that they are gone, they are not here. We still love them. God, do we love them. But we don’t quite know what to do with that love, now that they are gone.

Love, by its very nature, is meant to flow out of us, to draw us out of ourselves to do something wonderful and true for the one we love. What do we do with that love once we can no longer hold their hand, or dry their tears, or run toward them in happiness? Grief is love left over.

Tears are real. And so is joy. We have painful moments of letting go, and we have blissful moments of reunion. And much of our life is lived in between those two kinds of experiences.

But our Scriptures remind us, again, that what my mother said about heaven is, in so many ways,

absolutely correct. “Heaven is the joy of coming home, and the happiness never ends.”

In tonight’s first reading, we hear from the Old Testament *Song of Songs*. In our Catholic tradition, we believe that this book is an expression of the dialog between God’s heart, and our heart; between the God who made everything, and the soul of every one of God’s people.

The language is passionate. Did it surprise you? We don’t often come to church and hear a biblical character say, “Hark, my beloved is coming!” Can you hear the breathless joy as the biblical character says “Arise, my beloved and come to me! Let me see you! Let me hear your voice! I belong to you, and you belong to me! I yearn for you! You, whom my heart loves...”

Passionate stuff. Do you know who is speaking those words? *God*. And to whom? *You*. And *you*. And *every person* in every picture around this altar. And to every person who has ever lived or ever will live.

I sometimes look at my mother’s picture and I think about God saying those words to my mom. “Mary Ann, come to me. Let me see you. Let me hear your beautiful soprano voice. I belong to you, you whom my heart loves.”

And then I think of my mother, in those last quiet days of her hospice care, saying the same thing to the God who had made her. In the secret recesses of her heart, I believe my mother said to her Creator, “My beloved is coming. Let me see you. I belong to you. I yearn for you, O Lord, whom my heart loves.”

The Song of Songs is a beautiful expression of the faith of the Church. We belong to a God who loves us with more passion than we can imagine, fathom or contain.

And we believe that through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, our journey through the doorway of death is not a misty entrance into a murky netherworld, nor is it the annihilation of all that we have ever seen, been or loved.

No, the death of each of us is like a moment in the Nashville airport. Whatever baggage we still drag around, whatever burden we still carry, gets thrown to the ground. Whatever was broken in us is made whole.

And then... we see Him, whom our heart loves. The One who loves and yearns for us. Christ already sees us, and is already running toward us. And we can drop our burdens and run toward him.

The look on God’s face will be reflected on your face. Absolute bliss. Unfiltered joy. Love reunited. The joy of coming home.

And since this is heaven, all of the rules and categories concerning how time ‘works’ disappear

and don't apply. Which means that heaven is like a joyful homecoming that is constant. It doesn't happen just for a minute before we get our wings and our harp for a boring afterlife.

'Minutes' don't mean anything in eternity. As one theologian describes it, heaven is the joy of "eternally arriving in the presence of our God." *

Eternally arriving. I like that.

I pray about that on those days when I miss my mom, my grandparents, my friends who have died. I picture them, eternally arriving in the presence of God. I picture the bliss on their faces. And what did mom say? "The happiness never ends."

What is the best homecoming you've ever had? Tonight, in this Eucharist, thank God for that memory, because within it you have received a foretaste of what heaven will feel like. What is the best embrace you've ever received? What moments of joy can you recall when you finally saw the faces of those whom you loved and had missed for a while? Again, thank God for those moments of reunion – they contain a glimpse of heaven.

When in your life has your face been full of the kind of joy that cannot be contained? That's a fraction of what God's love has in store for us.

The Risen One loves you, yearns for you, rejoices in the sight of your face. This is the homecoming for which each of us is made. This is the homecoming for which we pray as we prayerfully remember those who have already gone home. Home, to him, whom our hearts love.

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**cf. Gerhard Lohfink, "Is This All There Is? On Resurrection and Eternal Life." (2018: Liturgical Press, Collegeville MN) page 209.*