

In Celebration of the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ
And in Thanksgiving
for the Life of Franceine Perry Rees

APRIL 6, 2010

Isaiah 61:1-3 + 1 John 2: 1-2 + Matthew 28: 1-10

HOMILY

Alleluia, Christ is Risen!
The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia!

And so is Franceine!

More than 1600 years ago, John Chrysostom, a writer of the early church, in speaking of the resurrection of Christ, said the following: "Christ is with me, whom shall I fear?" He encouraged his congregation not to lose hope because: "Where I am, there also are you; where you are, there too am I; we are one body... We are separated by space, but we are united by love. Not even death can cut us apart. For even if my body dies, my soul will live on and will remember my people."

I find comfort in these words this Easter Tuesday. They give us a context for remembering and celebrating the gift of the life of Franceine Perry Rees.

Franceine majored in English at East Carolina University and began her career as a writer with the University News Bureau while she was a graduate student there. She remained with the News Bureau until her retirement in 2000. For many years, Franceine was Lady of the Manor at the popular Christmas Madrigal Dinner series of musical productions at ECU. Throughout her life, she loved classical music, art, history, antiques, and cats. She was an enormously talented writer and performed and published extensively genealogical research on her family. An avid reader since early childhood, she was a past president of the Friends of Joyner Library at East Carolina University. Franceine was an active participant in many historical organizations including the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the Jamestown Society, the Society of 1812, the Colonial Dames, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the Virginia Genealogical Society. She was a former member of the Greenville Historic Preservation Commission and was very involved in her local community through the Tar River Neighborhood Association. A strong supporter of the Democratic Party, Franceine was a regular volunteer at the local polls on Election Day. And she was a longtime member of our parish family and our St. Lydia's Women's Guild here at St. Paul's.

This narrative from her obituary describes some of the many ways she has invested herself in the life of the community and of her parish family here at St. Paul's. But it hardly tells the real story of who she is and what she means to so many of us.

Her son David, whom Franceine loved more than any person in the world, says the following about his mother: “My mother was extremely generous. She had a loving nature. She really derived more joy out of helping others than she did from personal gain. She was fiercely loyal to friends and family, and always had an immense amount of love in her heart.” It’s why David and his friend Will, along with Ernie and Lena, chose the passage from Isaiah, the poet and prophet, for the first lesson. The stories are many of how Franceine has reached out to help people who were struggling. Money, food, surprising people even with a basket of oranges as a gesture of reaching out, unexpected Christmas presents. One woman shared with me that she was in really bad shape when she first came to Greenville – and it was Franceine who first reached out to offer hospitality. At her best, Franceine’s generous spirit touched so, so many people.

I first met her as a faithful desk volunteer in our office, often folding bags to prepare for our growing Food Pantry each Thursday. She found spiritual solace in our weekly Wednesday service and enjoyed our Wednesday suppers, often going out of her way to meet and introduce newcomers to me. I’ll always relish the Christmas Eve when, like a kid in a candy shop, sought me out to tell me David’s girlfriend, Riza, was coming to the late service. She was so excited. She wanted to be sure that Riza would be warmly welcomed and asked if she could come to the communion rail for a blessing, noting that Riza is of the Muslim faith. Do you remember, David and Riza, how proud and delighted Franceine was, when I blessed you, Riza, with the greeting Saleem Alaycum? It’s a memory of Franceine I will always cherish!

Whatever Franceine put her mind to doing, she did with zeal and finished what she started. Lena Carawan shared with me that this was especially true of the times in her past life she devoted to gardening. She would work from sunrise to sunset, working with intensity until she finished completely the project she began. It would hold her interest for awhile, and then she’d move on to something else. The same is true of her quest to do antiques and other such projects.

In my Easter Sermon this Sunday, prepared prior to Franceine’s death on Good Friday, I said something I’d like to repeat, and it’s a quote from Ernest Hemmingway, who said, “Life breaks us all, and sometimes we get stronger in the broken places.” It’s true, but sometimes we don’t get stronger. Sometimes in spite of ourselves and the best efforts of those who love us, and want to see us get strong in the broken places of our lives, we just can’t seem to make that transition.

A week ago today, we clergy in our Episcopal Diocese of East Carolina gathered with our Bishop as we do each year before Easter, to renew our commitment to ministry. This year, our new Assisting Bishop, Santosh Marray, gave the homily – and in speaking to us clergy in particular, said some things especially pertinent for us this afternoon as we gather in thanksgiving for the life of Franceine. The bishop used the story of Jacob in the Book of Genesis - that passage in which Jacob wrestled all night with what perhaps could have been an angel. The story ends with Jacob’s hip being forever dislocated – and, at the end of the struggle, Jacob received a blessing. In reflecting on this passage, Bishop Marray said some very insightful things, like God’s best work is done through our flawed humanity, for the Holy Spirit is often present and at work in our brokenness. “Beware,” Bishop Marry told us, “of anyone who does not walk with a limp!” For we minister best to others with our own wounds, especially if we have experienced ourselves in the valley of despair, or the valley of frustration and disappointments and the uncertainty of what tomorrow will bring.

Franceine Rees was a wounded healer. She walked with a limp and because of her brokenness, not in spite of it, God's strength touched others through her weakness.

On Saturday morning, we had a quiet service to observe that time between the death of Jesus on Good Friday and his resurrection Sunday morning. I spoke about an icon image from the Eastern Orthodox tradition which is much different than those which depict Christ risen from the dead. In the Holy Saturday icon, we see the image of the soon to be risen Jesus going into Hades and reaching down, grasping Adam by the wrist and pulling him and Eve into the new life of peace and joy and love. I found comfort in that and thought of Franceine. We've tried to do in her life what only God has been able to do in her death – and that is to free her from all that has kept her from experiencing fully the abundant life Franceine never, ever, stopped believing in.

Alleluia, Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen, indeed, alleluia!

And so is Franceine!

*Bob Hudak
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