"A Very Human Feeling"

A Homily by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
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Easter Week is a journey that takes us through whole of life and death. The journey begins in a place of exuberant joy on Palm Sunday as Jesus enters Jerusalem. Throughout his years of public ministry, Jesus had avoided Jerusalem—the seat of religious and political power. Instead, he brought his message of love and hope in a different, more just world to those in the back corners of the nation. He may have been greeted with an enthusiastic crowd upon his arrival in the city, but Jesus undoubtedly knew that there were also many powerful leaders watching with wariness. In short, he knew there could be trouble.

Indeed, the story of Easter week describes how Jesus' joyful arrival into Jerusalem devolves into a heartbreaking night of betrayal, followed by a dramatic political trial, and, finally, his public execution. As you may know, on the night Jesus was betrayed by one of his disciples, he prayed fervently alone in a garden. The Christian scripture describes Jesus as deeply grieved and crying out that he be spared from the violent death he anticipated. Rather than find support in the disciples who remain, they fall asleep. He suffers alone on that fearful night.

For many, facing death brings fear. All we *know* of death is what we, the living, experience: the sorrowful and shocking absence of life. Faced with the unknown, we often feel afraid. What happens after we die is one of the great questions of religious and philosophical inquiry. Possible answers include reincarnation, resurrection, nirvana, silence, and more.

Within Catholic Christianity, the tradition teaches that souls will face judgment for their sins which determines their acceptance into heaven or hell. However, even those destined for heaven may need time in purgatory to be purified of the lingering impact of certain sins. As they wait, those living on earth can implore God to open the gates of heaven for their beloved deceased family member or friend. The Mass for the Dead is a liturgy of prayers beseeching God to bestow favor and bring peace to the deceased.

Put to music, the Mass for the Dead becomes known as a Requiem, which is entitled for the Latin word 'rest' that begins the Mass. You might assume that a musical rendition addressing death would be intense, dark music—a musical manifestation of the fear of death. But keep in mind that a Requiem is a prayer for what happens *after* the rupture of death. It is a pleading for rest, for access to the beauty of heaven, for hope in an eternal goodness.

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In a few moments, we are going to hear Fauré's *Requiem* which has been described as a "lullaby for the dead." Rather than stern music suggesting fear and doom, the beauty of Fauré's Requiem evokes a sense of gentleness, of light, of peace.

In a 1921 letter to a friend, Fauré explains why:

> Everything I managed to entertain in the way of religious illusion I put into my Requiem, which moreover is dominated from beginning to end by a very human feeling of faith in eternal rest.

Firstly, you may have noticed his reference to "religious illusion." Apparently Fauré was a bit of a religious skeptic despite all his years of employ in churches. Nonetheless, he describes his Requiem as reflective of his beliefs. Most notably, he depicts the piece as being underwritten throughout by "a very human feeling of faith in eternal rest."

While fear in the face of death may be a very human feeling, Fauré suggests so also is faith in eternal rest. Not *knowing* what lies beyond the horizon of death, we trust that what awaits us is rest. Consider how we so often wish for the dead that they 'Rest in Peace.' Far from a trite trope, Fauré suggests this wish signals a very human feeling.

On this Palm Sunday, as we remember the hope inspired by a prophet speaking of a better world, may we also embrace the hope that death, whenever it may come, may be met with hope in an eternal rest. May the lullaby of these songs be a balm to our fears and stoke our faith in peaceful rest.

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