

August 21, 2014
Rob Stuart's Memorial Service
St. Catherine's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Jim Nixon

O Lord, graciously accept the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts that they may prepare us to forever rejoice in your kingdom. Amen.

As I look out on this congregation gathered here by the common bond of the tragic death of Rob Stuart, I know that words are inadequate to temper our grief. Therefore I will make my words brief and address them to three groups of people.

I want first to speak about Rob; I want to then speak to you – Rob's peers and friends who are gathered here tonight to support one another and Rob's family; and last I want to speak to all of us.

As for Rob, we will forever ask the question, "why." Why in spite of all that we've desired and offered – indeed in spite of all that Rob longed for so deeply himself – why are we here tonight? You see we are a people who desire a direct cause and effect. And what we've learned over these past years on this journey with Rob and especially over these past 5 days – sometimes life does not lend itself to direct cause and effect. Our thinking goes something like this – maybe if we knew why, then we could have kept it from happening – and in the future keep it from happening to someone else we love. But we cannot know nor will we ever know the series of complex and, to Rob, overwhelming issues that led to the events of last Friday night and Saturday morning.

What we can know and trust tonight, however, is the joy and love we felt in his presence. Rob

was a loyal companion to his friends and brought many moments of humor and glimpses of the big heart that animated his relationships with all those he knew. What we can trust in faith tonight is that the one who brought “good news” to those who knew him is the one who, in being made whole, experiences the good news we proclaim as people of faith. Rob, we proclaim, knows the Lord’s favor; he has been set free and released from all that we sensed bound him in his darkest moments. His deepest desire to be healed and to please the ones he loved the most is made real tonight – not in the way any of us would have wished or chosen but made whole nonetheless. Rob has walked through the valley of the shadow of death and been met by the good shepherd. Tonight we proclaim that Jesus has hoisted Rob high upon his shoulders and brought him safely to the flock. For all that we cannot know, our faith is that in the resurrection Rob has returned to the flock and at this very moment rests in the loving arms of his Lord Jesus.

To Rob’s peers and friends and mentors, we have seen your tremendous pain and grief. And it has grieved us nearly as much as Rob’s death. We see in your eyes and hear in your words the implied and unanswerable questions and the powerful sense of loss. When I hear your words and your questions I think of the story of the death of Lazarus. Lazarus’ sister Mary confronts Jesus when he arrives at her house “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” And what does Jesus do? He doesn’t offer any reason why he was detained or a pat and easy answer of sorts. What does Jesus do? He weeps. And those gathered around him say, “See how he loved him.” And those of us gathered with you tonight can’t help but respond the same way about you, “See how they loved Rob.”

No matter the pain that surrounded Rob, tonight, he is unbound, he is set free, he is made whole.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul utters these profound words...

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

What touches me so deeply about Paul's words is that there is nothing I can do or nothing I choose not to do that can separate me from God's love – even my choice – if it be my will – to not love him. This is the kind of unconditional love that embraces Rob and embraces each of you – his peers and friends and mentors. Just as you embraced Rob with your love – you, too, are embraced this night and always by God in Jesus Christ who shares in your tears as he indeed weeps with you. Tears are healing. Jesus knows that as we cry we too will be healed.

And now for all of us. As we gather here in great numbers, Rob's death raises a question. It is this! What are we going to do about Rob's death? After the pain, the shock, the anger; after the hurt and tears, what are we going to do about Rob's death. You see, it's natural to cry in his memory. But tonight my question for everyone of us is this "how will we live in his memory? Our challenge individually and together is to "make meaning from the loss of Rob." Nothing can take away the good things of Rob's life. And so, when you are ready maybe look deeply into your own life and search for where you can grow or reach out to others with similar experiences taking them by the hand and walking their walk in Rob's name, or set-up a scholarship or some other memorial in Rob's name, or work in some capacity to better the lives of others. There are many ways to honor Rob. When you are ready – do something to add meaning to Rob's life.

The story we celebrate tonight is a story of love. It is a love that is palpable in our gathering – both in our presence and in our word and song. We are separated from Rob for some period of time but that doesn't mean that his memory won't animate our lives in the times that lie ahead. His memory is a manifestation of the love that surrounded his parents and family for 21 years and all of us for some lesser but no less significant number of years. On this night heavy with grief – I am struck by the words of “Heart of the World” a song on Lady Antebellum's album “Own the Night.” As I listened to these words on Tuesday morning they spoke profoundly to me of Rob. God knows Rob struggled to have hope at times, but when he did have hope – and he did – he truly believed he could beat the odds of the disease that gripped his mind and body and soul– in this sense Rob was a true believer. Lady Antebellum...

*Oh, and hope is the soul of the dreamer
And heaven is the home of my God
It only takes one true believer
To believe you can still beat the odds*