

**A Cloud of Witnesses**  
**Rev. Alida Ward**  
**May 27 2018**

My daughter Brigitta is home for a couple weeks,  
 which is fun -- beach walks and late night TV and junk food binges together.  
 Last Monday we decided to road trip up to New Haven --  
 she wanted to see Yale's art museum again,  
 and there was a Turkish restaurant we wanted to check out.

Turned that a few thousand other people had decided to take a trip to New Haven on Monday.  
 It was graduation day at Yale.

And it was crazy.

We got what I'm pretty sure was the last parking spot in the city,  
 and then started wandering toward campus.  
 The diplomas had just been handed out,  
 graduates were streaming out of the residential colleges,  
 elation and relief writ large upon their faces.

That was fun to see.

But what I really enjoyed was seeing their posses.

Around each black-robed graduate there was a posse of people, a swarm surrounding them.  
 There were of course proud moms and dads, easy to pick out,  
 they were the ones so swollen up with pride they could barely move.

There were grandparents, too, beaming continuously --

I saw one grandpa who appeared to have bought every Yale-themed item of clothing he could  
 find at the bookstore to wear.

There were younger siblings, clearly awed by the Yaleness of it all.

There was one family that had *all* worn Hawaiian shirts *and* leis -- I was really hoping they  
*were* Hawaiian and not just being embarrassing.

And Brigitta and I just got the biggest kick out of just watching these clumps go by --  
 the graduate in the middle, and everyone who loved them moving with them as one,  
 like a little cloud of love surrounding them.

Like a cloud of love.

Greg read to you just now from the Letter to the Hebrews.

It was a letter written waaay back when to a bunch of Christians, when being Christian was  
 still a pretty new concept.

And the person writing the letter was saying to these new Christians,  
 remember, you're not on this journey alone!

You are part of a community of faith that is here, and is beyond here.

All around you now are people who cherish you,  
and those who have already left this life are still with you  
to lift you up, to inspire you.

And then he ends up with this wonderful phrase:

“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,  
let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.”

We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

I’ve always loved this image.

If you’ve ever hiked high enough up a mountain to walk into a cloud,  
you know what it feels like to be surrounded by one --  
for that moment when you are in the misty heart of a cloud,  
it’s all that you see and breathe and taste.

You feel the touch of it on your skin;

And that’s what the writer of this letter was going for

when he said that each of us is surrounded by a cloud of witnesses:

know yourself, he was saying, to be as completely enveloped by the blessing of this community  
as if you were in the heart of a cloud,

know yourself to be as wrapped in the love of God’s family as if it were the misty air you  
breathed and touched.

It’s a powerful, evocative image, and it’s meant to be:

you are not in this alone, the writer was saying;

you are surrounded by those of past and present who want to teach you, to love you, to care  
for you, to touch your life with blessing.

Just like each of those graduates we saw was surrounded by a circle of care,  
so too we, the scripture says,

so too each one of us always is enveloped by a cloud of witnesses.

Today, at Greenfield Hill church,

we are marking twenty years since the dedication of a place we call the Memorial Garden.

There are pictures in your bulletin today of what it looked like 20-some years ago – before it  
was a Garden.

Back then, it was just a couple acres of newly-cleared land behind the Barn,  
land that had been an impassable tangle of fallen trees and vines and debris.

People in this church dreamed of creating a place that would be beautiful,  
a garden where everything planted would be in memory of someone loved,  
a place of rest for all of us,  
and a resting-place for those who preceded us to Heaven.

And it has become all that, and we celebrate that today as we honor those who imagined it into being.

But more than that, it has become a place to know the presence of a great cloud of witnesses, to feel, as close as breathing, the nearness of those who are loving us from God's own heaven.

On the stone walls of the Garden are etched the names of those who now rest there.

And I like to walk along the walls and run my fingers over their names.

They are grandmothers and grandfathers,  
sisters, brothers, parents, children.

They are those who were so very loved,  
and are still so very near,

as close to us as a cloud enveloping us.

I feel it there.

I especially like to walk along the walls with kids from the church,  
and tell them who these people are --

some of them they already know, some they've heard of.

I tell them stories -- this woman loved bluebirds, I say...

this man made me laugh every time I was with him --

this one, she could play the flute like an angel.

We feel them, our cloud of witnesses,

we feel the presence of their lives and their love,

we know their inspiration and are strengthened by their faith.

In the Garden, we have worshiped, we have grieved,

we have gathered for weddings, and we have gathered for memorials.

But one of my favorite moments each year

is when we unleash happy chaos on the Garden

in the annual Easter Egg Hunt.

Beforehand, our Junior Deacons carefully hide literally a thousand eggs in the Garden.

It takes them well over an hour to hide them.

It takes the little kids ten minutes tops to find them all.

Well, *almost* all -- I found a pink egg with a Hershey's kiss in it earlier this week.

And I love it so much not just because the kids are having so much fun --  
and there is so much candy.

I love it because those little ones are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses  
who I know are delighting in their delight.

As they run by the stone that bears the name of Tom Kennedy,

I can see Tom's smile --

Dr. Tom, who was the chief of pediatrics and who never met a kid he didn't love.  
 As the kids hunt behind the wall with Len Morgan's name on it,  
 I know he's laughing with them;  
 I can feel him telling me to make *sure* every kid gets enough candy.  
 And we do.

Our Garden has become a place where the truth of that scripture is made real:  
 that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses;  
 that we do not live the life of faith alone,  
 that we do not live our lives alone.

Before us, but still here with us, go those whom we cherished and who cherish us.  
 Gone from us, but right beside us, are those who whisper words of wisdom,  
 encourage us for what lies ahead.

Just like those graduates I saw on the streets of New Haven,  
 with a happy swarm of supporters all around them,  
 we are, each of us, surrounded by love --  
 here, now, and beyond.

By a cloud of witnesses.

And in the Garden you feel it.

It is , as the ancient Celts would describe it, a thin place,  
 a place where the veil between heaven and earth becomes so thin as to be transparent,  
 and what is there is here, and what is gone is not,  
 and those we love feel as close as the mist of the cloud around us.

You don't *have* to be in a thin place to know yourself surrounded by love -- though it helps us  
 to be, it helps.

But the truth is that we are always surrounded.

Each one of us by our own special cloud of witnesses.

For each of us, for each one of you, there are faces in that cloud of witnesses,  
 voices, which are yours alone, for you alone;  
 witnesses to faith and love who call you forward  
 when the way is hard.

These are those who run the race with you,  
 before you and behind you, around you to lift you and to whisper words of hope.

An uncle who loved you dearly,  
 a friend who knew you truly,  
 a mentor who taught you goodness.

For me, my cloud of witnesses includes my grandfather,  
 Professor Jimmy McShane;  
 my English teacher, Julia Shields;  
 Hume Cronyn, the actor, who was our neighbor here on the hill, and whom I adored.  
 They are among my cloud of witnesses.  
 You have yours.

On this Memorial Day weekend, I want to close by remembering words that I heard from an  
 army chaplain, years ago, 15 years ago,  
 when American troops were heading across the sands of Iraq toward Baghdad.  
 The chaplain of the First Brigade was interviewed by an intrepid reporter traveling with them.  
 What do you tell these soldiers? the interviewer asked.  
 They're young and they're overwhelmed and they're far from home. What do you tell them?  
 The chaplain pointed toward the stars, and said,  
 I remind them that we sleep under the same stars as Abraham did,  
 on his journey of faith with God.  
 I tell them the story of Daniel, he said, who lived on these same sands,  
 who never lost his faith,  
 who kept serving us God even under oppression.  
 What he was saying was that there was with them, with his young soldiers,  
 a great cloud of witnesses from far back in the annals of faith,  
 people whose love for their God didn't waver,  
 and whose lives still bore witness in the sands of Iraq  
 to faith which upholds and strengthens, which gives life and hope.  
 What he was doing, that Chaplain, was reminding them  
 that they, that we, do not travel the journey of faith alone,  
 do not live our lives alone.

On this weekend of memory, on this day of remembering our own saints of the faith,  
 I invite you -- whether out in our Garden after this service,  
 or in a place that you find for yourself,  
 to think of the ones who are your cloud of witnesses,  
 to give thanks for those  
 in this place and beyond this place --  
 in this time and beyond this time --  
 who live and who love still, ever, always  
 and ever guide us forward.

Remember.  
 Give thanks.

Amen.