

The Spirit of Memphis
The Second Sunday of Easter
Sunday, April 19, 2020
The Rev. Paul McLain

“He has given us a new birth into a living hope.” In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

We've been here before. Our city of Memphis was the epicenter of the Yellow Fever outbreak of 1878. The Angevine family, like many, escaped the city. They went to the old family farm in Grenada, Mississippi. A man in the fields nearby noticed there was no activity around the plantation house. He pried open the shutters and broke the glass. As he frantically searched the house for anyone who might still be alive, he found the youngest Angevine daughter, nine-year old Lena, who appeared she may have a little life left in her. The man knelt down and lifted her weightless frame and carried her out into the fresh air. He rested a piece of raw bacon on her lips, and watched as Lena began to suck on the first bite of food she had in days. It was then that Lena, more dead than alive, made her way back.

With no surviving family, Lena came back to Memphis to live with her grandparents. She graduated from St Mary's Episcopal School. Then Lena knew exactly what she would do with the rest of her life. She would become a nurse. Lena remembered the unnamed man who saved her life. Like him, she would devote her life to saving others.

In our scripture passage from First Peter, we learn the ultimate goal of faith in Jesus's resurrection – our salvation. We often think of salvation in future terms, such as saved to go to heaven. But what if heaven is being in the presence of God? Then, that's available to us not only in the future, but in the here and now.

The word salvation itself is not so much a theological term, as it is a medical one. Paul Tillich writes, “Salvation is derived from *salvus*, which means ‘healthy’ or ‘whole,’ and it can be applied to every act of healing: to the healing of sickness, of demonic possession, and of servitude to sin and to the ultimate power of death.”

Salvation is a present reality as well as a future hope. First Peter more aptly describes these two dimensions as one by calling them a “living hope.” When Jairus said to Jesus, “Come and save my daughter,” Jesus didn't say, “I'll take care of that in the after-life.” Instead, Jesus went to the bedside and saved his daughter. And he saved someone else along the way. Jesus still applies salve to our bodily wounds today. And he calls us to join him in healing one another.

One person who answered that call was Dr. Will Armstrong. When the yellow fever outbreak began in 1878, he made the same sacrifice that some of you healthcare professionals are making right now. He lived apart from his family so that he would not infect them if he contracted the disease. Dr. Armstrong sent his wife Lula and their eight children to Columbia, Tennessee, while he stayed in Memphis. He worked alongside the sisters of St. Mary's Cathedral, led by Sister

Constance, in ministering to the sick throughout the city day and night. We honor Constance and her companions in a churchwide commemoration on September 9th, the date of her death. Dr. Will Armstrong was one of those companions. He stayed at the bedside of Constance and gave instructions to the sisters throughout her final days. He also stayed at the bedside of the dean of St. Mary's, The Reverend George Harris. Through the grace of God and the skills, wisdom, and valiant work of Dr. Armstrong, Dean Harris survived. As Dr. Armstrong left St. Mary's late one night, one of the sisters ran after him and handed him a note. When the doctor later opened the envelope, he found two \$50 bills wrapped in a note that said, "An expression of the affection and gratitude of the sisters." He was so touched that he wrote his wife Lula that night, "If I survive this epidemic, I will repay the Sisters."

I think of how much those two fifty-dollar bills and that heartfelt note from the Sisters meant to him. One of the signs of hope in our time is all the appreciation being shown to our healthcare workers in Memphis and around the world. Many of our restaurants are taking meals and treats to all the workers at our hospitals, nursing homes, and healthcare institutions. Another boutique company gave all the workers at one hospital specialty soaps with the gift bags emblazoned with their words to us, "Wash your hands." Many of our Calvary parishioners are sending cards and handwritten notes to area healthcare workers. And lots of children and adults are taking chalk in hand to draw tributes and messages of love on hospital sidewalks for those of you on the front lines of this.

Back to Lena, the 9-year old girl who was saved on the family farm in Grenada, graduated from St. Mary's School here in Memphis, and decided to become a nurse. In 1898, she saw an ad in a newspaper saying that the Surgeon General of the United States Army was looking for nurses who were immune to yellow fever. Lena answered the ad and was sent to Cuba as the chief nurse, working alongside Dr. Walter Reed. She nursed and cared for those who underwent the trials that, at long last, determined that yellow fever was transmitted by mosquitos. Her work and that of her team saved millions of people. But what she remembered from that time were the faces of each soldier as she stayed day and night at their bedside, nursing them back to health.

Our city too has been saved. We've gone from being the epicenter of an epidemic to being an epicenter for healthcare. We've been handed down a sacred inheritance by the examples of Dr. Will Armstrong, Lena, and the unnamed man who saved her life. Like Jesus, they sought to save the person right in front of them. This is a time to save and a time to celebrate salvation. That *is* the spirit of Memphis. That *is* the living hope of resurrection. *Amen.*