

Here is the funeral homily I gave for New York City Firefighter William *Billy* Tolley. I am putting this homily in the bulletin as a tribute to him, to New York City Fire Department, to all firefighters and all first responders. Thank you for who you and your great service.

Along with people of every faith, nationality, and culture, I offer my deepest condolences to you Marie, the wife of Billy Tolley, to your precious daughter Bella, to his mother Marie and her husband Frank, to his father Bob and his wife Marion, to his brother Bobby and his wife Amy, to Marie sister Kim and her husband Ryan, to her sister Theresa and her husband Steve, to his best friend Chris, to his brothers and sisters of fire company Ladder 135 and Engine 286., to the people of the New York City, to the members of the band Internal Bleeding, and to the thousands of firefighters who have traveled to Bethpage from far and near in memory of their fallen brother.

We New Yorkers cherish the well-earned name given to our firefighters: *New York's Bravest*. Your members have shown that throughout your history. We love and value you for who you are and what you do for us, day in day out, often unnoticed until a tragic moment such as the death of firefighter Billy Tolley on Thursday, April 20th occurs. His death leaves so many pained, confused, and crying out for meaning during their sorrow.

Billy's daughter Bella, named after Billy grandmother, knew something was wrong before Marie could find the words to tell Bella about her Daddy. *Mommy, why were you gone all day yesterday. What happened; I know something is wrong.* As courageous and strong brave as any firefighter who has ever rushed into a burning building, this loving mother, carrying her crushing grief, gently tells Bella that her Daddy has gone home to God. Bella, as wise as any ancient philosopher says *Mommy, Daddy is too young to die.* Bella, as vulnerable and innocent as any eight-year little girl can be on the Eve of her first communion, cries; *Mommy, I have no Daddy.* In the numbness of her pain, Marie tells her Bella, *you know Daddy loved to help people. That's what firemen do. They help people. Your Daddy was a good man who died helping people.* In the words of the most difficult conversation a parent can ever have with her child, we hear words of faith. Our second reading today from St. Paul, the great preacher of the Resurrection of Jesus, proclaims the same faith-filled words of Marie: *For Christ, while we were still helpless, yet died at the appointed time for the ungodly. Indeed, only with difficulty does one die for a just person, though perhaps for a good person one might even find courage to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

It is true that only with great difficulty does a person die for a good person, though perhaps for such a person one might find the courage to die. Billy, like any firefighter, put his life on the line, for any person who called for help. Creed, color, nationality means nothing to a firefighter. Their goal is to protect and save lives. Jesus Christ, the Son of God and a man like us in all things but sin, was willing to die for everyone who had ever lived. Jesus Christ died out of love for Billy Tolley, and for every one of us.

Billy was a man of passion. His brother Bobby told me that Billy had a passion for being a firefighter. It was not a job to him but a calling, a way of life. Bobby told me his brother cared about everyone and would help anyone he could. Billy was a devoted father. I asked Bella what are some of the favorite things you did with your Daddy. She told, *I loved to play the drums with him and I love to go to get chocolate ice cream with him.*

Our teachers in our religious education program knew him as the gentle father who dropped Bella off for her religion class and picked her up. We knew him as the Dad who sat with Bella and Marie at our 10:00 am children's Mass and clapped along with the song you just sang before the Gospel: *Alle, Alle*. Billy was loved by his fire department family, especially those of his fire company the *Myrtle Turtles*. His wife Marie laughed at the memory of how Billy loved gadgets. He had gadgets to boil eggs, slice eggs and to peel eggs. Recently when Marie was preparing a watermelon to serve, Billy said he would like to look for a watermelon slicer. Billy, the driver of the fire truck, liked to add his personally made gadgets to the truck, but I better not mention that with the Fire Commissioner present here since that is against department regulations! Billy was determined to make the first communion party for Bella perfect, and since Bella loved cupcakes, he was going to get a cross made from cupcakes. He ended buying two cakes since he had forgot that he had ordered one already. Recently, Billy put tinfoil on budding robin's nest on his porch to stop their building on his porch. After his death, the robins continue to use the tinfoil as a roof, and Bella and Marie knew Billy was home with God and they had this sign as he laughed with them in eternity. There was an expression used by both his family and his firefighter family: *that is Billy being Billy.*

He loved playing the drums in the band and going on tour with them. I must confess my music taste run between elevator music and FM Lite, but it was clear from the outpouring of praise and love that Billy and his band Internal Bleeding have received that he was a very talented and gifted man. On the Band's Facebook, they wrote: "Our drummer, the heartbeat of the band, died today," the group wrote on its Facebook page. *"There are ZERO WORDS to describe the loss. He was a good, decent and honorable man who loved his friends, his family and the people he served. There will never be another like him.*

Zero Words to describe the loss brings us back to Bella question about why did her Daddy have to die. The last time Billy Tolley was in this church was at the 10:00 a.m. Mass on Easter Sunday. He heard proclaimed the heart of the Catholic faith in the Gospel that morning as he sat with his family. *As the friends of Jesus go to anoint his dead body, they are asked a question by an angel standing in empty tomb. Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has been raised and goes before you in Galilee. Go and tell his disciples.* A few years ago, I was on a tour of the Holy Land and stood in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher: our tour guide, a Palestinian Catholic, told us: *This is the place where Jesus rose from the dead. I know that because my father told me that. He knew that because his father told him...*and down through the generation we have passed on by the power of the Holy Spirit this truth: Jesus has been raised from the dead. Today, and at every Mass we announce the message as Jesus told us to: *Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.*

Another question remains: why do you look for the living among the dead. Billy's dead body is in the casket, but Billy is not there. Billy's love for his family, his friends, his passions for firefighting and music, his dreams and hopes, his memories, all that made Billy Billy we Catholics call his soul, his spirit. That which made Billy Billy lives. God breathed that soul into Billy forty-two years ago, and that soul is eternal, that soul is with God and will be one day reunited with his body. Billy is more alive today in the kingdom of God that he was as he climbed that ladder in Ridgewood. He is loving Bella and Marie and all of you right now. Jesus told us, *I am the Resurrection and the Life, whoever believes in me shall never die*. In the famous Gospel passage of John that gives so much hope to Christians, Jesus said, *God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him shall not die but have eternal life*. Bella, when you receive Jesus in Holy Communion for the first time this Saturday, tell Jesus you love him and tell Jesus to take the best care of your father. Remember the little book we gave you on Easter Sunday at Mass; *The angel said Don't be scared. Jesus is no longer dead. Look inside and you will see that He is not here. He is risen. Yes, it's true. Just as he said he would die*. Bella, I know your sad, but I also know that your Daddy is alive with Jesus and that your Daddy will always be loving you. My brothers and sisters, why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He is risen. Billy Tolley is home with God. I will end with a prayer about remembering Billy:

*BURY MY BODY but don't bury my beliefs
 BURY MY HEART but don't bury my love
 BURY MY EYES but not my vision
 BURY MY FEET but not the path of my life
 BURY MY HANDS but don't bury my work
 BURY MY SHOULDERS but not the concerns I carried
 BURY MY VOICE but not my message
 BURY MY MIND but don't bury my dreams
 BURY ME BUT DON'T BURY MY LIFE. I am with you; I am with Jesus*