

## Celebrations of Life for Hugh and Mary

### “Hugh and Mary’s Place with God”

March 16, 2012 – Third Week in Lent (Mary) and April 23, 2022 - First Week of Easter (Hugh)

Grace and Peace to you from God the Creator of Life - and from our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

A few weeks ago we lost another one of what we might call the follow up wave of the Greatest Generation. Ornell Hugh Asleson was great in everyone’s eyes but his own. While he served his country, his family and God for his whole life, Hugh was what one family member described as an “awkward introvert.” He was sort of an enigma, enterprising as a child, working in various jobs for various folks in various locations, it was as if he was looking for something to make him a better human being, to flip the switch that would allow his inner light to shine and release his quick wit, his sense of humor and that smile.

For the past three years we have all been held captive in one way or another to a global pandemic that took away one of our basic human necessities: fellowship. Human connection is the lifeblood of any relationship, any family, any community. And when one discovers a loving fellowship with “the one” that God has fashioned for you, the ups and downs and gifts and challenges of this life take on a significance that can only be matched in the Church Triumphant - where we will go to live with God and the communion of Saints in eternity.

Ornell Hugh Asleson and Mary Ruth Houchin found that divine fellowship in each other, and it completed each one of them in ways they knew - but that those around them would not have even guessed at - it was such a seamless interface. *From Mary’s 2012 Eulogy by Joni:* “My Mom and Dad were married for almost 48 years. They worked together with a quiet elegance that left us bystanders in awe. They were the most beautiful dancers and were rarely apart. She ate the tomatoes off of his sandwiches, and he ran all electronic devices for her with only mild complaining...(And) If you would ask them the secret to their success my Dad would have said that it was because he did what he was told. And he would also tell you that Mary was almost always right.

I think that they each had a suspicion, deep inside themselves, that they could do life apart from the other - but if they had any say about it - they would choose never to be without their life’s partner, their love, their “soul mate.” I mean, even in death they completed each other’s sentences! While Mary passed away in the midst of Lent ten years ago, Hugh hung around to keep her flame of hope burning in their circle of life - family and friends - and then he joined her just days away from Holy Week, so that they could celebrate Easter together in their own Resurrection! That’s just how they always seemed to be: together - completing each other’s sentences and lives - closing the loop, and being the best of parents, grandparents, siblings, relatives and friends to those of us celebrating both remarkable lives.

Our Gospel lesson today is the same one I read for Mary. It’s from John, the one that says, “*in my Father’s house are many mansions (today, our translation calls them ‘dwelling places’...)*” Jesus is comforting his inner circle of friends at supper on their final night together, and assuring them that **he** would be taking care of all the details, that they would *not* need to prepare their own dwelling places, but that **he, himself** would see to each one, personally. It’s exactly as Mary did it more than a decade ago, when she insisted that places should be reserved in Pleasant Valley, and that funeral arrangements should be completed. She wanted all the preparations to be made ahead of time, so that those left behind did not have to be burdened. In fact, Joni and Cathy had very few of those details left to take care of, so the story is that this gospel came in an e-mail devotion which arrived in Cathy’s inbox shortly before they met with me. It was as if God and Mary and sent it along. Strange that as we prepared for this service, both the girls remember Mary’s service as having been deeply impacted by Hugh - that he had

chosen the hymns, the readings, the flow -- so in a way they both were taking care of their girls - preparing them for this occasion - just each in their own unique ways.)

Although we really don't know what heaven will be like - save that we have been promised that we will be with God - I do like to think about what someone's dwelling place in heaven might look like. Hugh's will look exactly as Mary would have chosen it - and for him that would be just perfect. But to try to describe Hugh, or Mary and Hugh, well - there just aren't enough positive words. So let's just ponder on how they reflected the best of God's image in them. For Mary I had chosen the word "comforter" and for Hugh, it just has to be "the bringer of joy."

For where Mary was a gentle heart and the rock that grounded her family (and did I mention she could cook?! Yep, Mary could make a brownie.) Alternately, Hugh was the funster, the party bringer, the fixer, the bread man and he could NOT cook. (It's a good think that he and Tony the Tiger have been buddies for years...) And when those two attributes join together - well, you get Frosted Flake doughnuts at Hugh's wake, just as there were brownies at Mary's. Comfort and Joy. Rolled into one.

Hugh was Mary's equal, but in a completely different way. He was not as comfortable puttering alone in the kitchen - but loved the company of good friends and good food - I will always remember him not only at this table of Grace, but at tables in all the local restaurants where he would go with the Thursday night group who actually came to church first, but I always knew it was just a prelude to their fellowship around the dinner table. I also cherish the time around the table at which we studied the Bible together, because Mary "encouraged" Hugh to come with her. She had an innocent trust, but Hugh had a faith as strong as the rock of Gibraltar - and a wisdom and "horse sense" that always made Jesus' words mean so much more than just "teaching."

So, the very best part of John's gospel passage for us to hear today is the very first verse, and it might as well come from Hugh and Mary themselves: "*Do not let your hearts be troubled...*" Hear those words from God through her and take comfort in them. Hear them from him, and rejoice. For they are not troubled any longer; they have gone before us and are together again, helping Jesus prepare our places in the presence God, just as they were taught and just as they taught their families. Serving another is the greatest joy of human living, the most faith part of human loving.

And did they every love! Not just their own great loves, but as instruments of God's love through them, and to and through all of us. + Love that comes through the blessing of Aaron, from Numbers 6) which here at Advent we confer upon a newborn child of God on the day of their baptism, reminding us all that first and foremost, we are claimed as God's beloved even before we are born. + Love that comes through the amazing comfort of the well-known Psalm 23 - God is with us, and has a place in his house just for us. + Love that Paul described to the Christians in Rome, when he reminded them that there is nothing, nothing, nothing that will ever separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus. And finally, the beloved words from Our Savior himself, "*I AM the way, the truth and the life...*"

Hugh took these scriptures to heart and lived them out, and in so doing he brought his own special kind of joy to the very heart of God. As Mother Teresa reminded us, "*Death is nothing else but going home to God, the bond of love will be unbroken for all eternity.*" And now Hugh and Mary and all the saints in light are together again in the presence of God, and we can receive comfort in the promise that now there is no pain, no sickness, no suffering. Just comfort, always comfort. Then joy, always joy. As you grieve Hugh, and mark the completion of the circle of life for them both, let the song in your head carry throughout the next few days. "*O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy, o tidings of comfort and joy!*" \* Rest in peace, friends, we will be together again. Amen.

Pastor Susan Langhauser, Advent Lutheran Church, Olathe, KS

\*God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen (1961 updated hymn)