

Fearless: Fear of Life's Final Moments Sunday, 5/30/21

Last week we stared down our counter-productive tendency to suppose that the very worst-case scenario that we can imagine is also the most likely to happen. Sometimes the house really is on fire, but usually, our toast is just burning. Jesus calls us to trust Him radically in the face of our fears, jumping into the water of faith like a child jumping into the arms of a parent.

This week, we confront our fear of one of the few things in life that we know we all must certainly face: Our death, and the time leading up to it.

One of the reasons death is so scary is that we still know so very little about it. Oh, we know the biology of our bodies pretty well, and certainly well enough to know that as we get older we wind up with more medical tests, procedures, and replacements. That knowledge of the aging process carries its own raft of fears, doesn't it? What if I lose my eyesight or my hearing? What if I can no longer drive or even walk?

We know something about the ceremonies surrounding death, like visitations, funerals, grave-side interment services, and the variety of customs surrounding what we do with our dead bodies, although those customs seem to be changing rapidly.

And we certainly know of the many colorful metaphors for death that are given in the Bible. As helpful as those metaphors are, they don't exactly give us a textbook description of what to expect.

Many of us even know death first-hand because we've seen someone dying or dead. But none of us know death from the first-person perspective, because none of us has died. And that's what makes death scary, because whatever we really believe about dying, we're never going to be able to truly know it until we experience it for ourselves.

As a pastor, I've been with many people over the years who have been dying and have died. And although we all must die someday, not all deaths are the same. Some deaths are sudden and tragic, cutting short a life and stunning loved ones. Some deaths are slow and filled with suffering, and when death comes there's a welcome relief from the pain. Many deaths fall somewhere in the murky middle, with loved ones left to grieve a loss, but also left with many years of cherished memories to celebrate. Whatever the circumstances of the death, there are always survivors who are looking to find meaning and comfort in the midst

of death, both because of their grief, but also, because as human beings, we all have to face down the fears that come with knowing that someday, we also will die.

As a pastor, I've also heard people express all kinds of interesting beliefs about what happens after death. Some believe that we simply cease to be when our bodies die. That is surely a sad and seemingly futile and hopeless thing to believe. One man told me he was hoping to be reincarnated as a dog. A great many people, not having thought this through very carefully, assume that that this body is the last one they'll have, and their eternal future will be one in spirit only, somewhere "up there." And in truth, even the Bible was written by people with differing views of death. You may remember that the Sadducees were "sad, you see" because they didn't believe in the resurrection! But today we're going to be Easter People, and focus in on the New Testament promise of resurrection and eternal life that came to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Spoiler alert: It's good news! The Bible won't answer all our questions about the who, what, when, and where of our deaths, but it does address the most essential thing that we all seem to be afraid of. Will my death be the end of me?

Our first Bible reading today is one of the most frequently read passages at funerals. Why? Because it's such a comfortable metaphor for life after death. It seems to paint a picture of heaven as an infinitely large Bed and Breakfast where we'll all have permanent rooms with no bills to pay. What's more, we don't have to worry about getting lost, because Jesus will come back and lead us to our new home personally, a home that's marked by truth, life, and the personal presence of God. Is it a literal description of life after death? Probably not, but when we're facing death, it's okay to get a little lost in the metaphors, because the comfort they bring with their vivid pictures is what we need when facing the ultimate unknown. The truth of this passage remains worthy of our faith. Jesus has gone to be with His Father, where he has prepared for our arrival, and he will come to bring us into God's presence when the time is right.

Max Lucado notes that this language comes from a reference to 1st-century marriage customs, when a groom would go and prepare a home for their bride before the wedding.¹ In

¹ Max Lucado. *Fearless: Imagine Your Life Without Fear*, pp 118. Thomas Nelson (2009).

other words, from the Christian perspective, funerals can almost be seen as weddings, joyful times of celebrating our eternal uniting with Christ. When we say that we are holding a “celebration of life,” it actually has a double meaning. We celebrate the gift of a person’s first life, but we also celebrate the promise of their resurrection life.

But what if we don’t believe in resurrection? In our next reading, the Apostle Paul speaks to those in the church who share that quandary. {Read 1Corinthians 15:12-23 MSG}

Jesus didn’t invent resurrection. He wasn’t even the first person to be raised from the dead. And yet it’s Christ’s resurrection that matters so much to us. Why?

An often-overlooked thing about those who were raised before Christ is that they eventually must have died again, just as we assume that Lazarus died again after Jesus brought him out of the tomb. Our hope for our own resurrection doesn’t come from those accounts. Instead, it comes from the fact that Jesus himself, the sinless Son of God, died and rose three days later. Because of that, we can believe the promise that Jesus makes in the Gospel of John: “the time is coming when all the dead in their graves will hear the voice of God’s Son, and they will rise again.”²

Paul puts it all into perspective in 1Corinthians 15: “if there is no resurrection for Christ, everything we've told you is smoke and mirrors... But the truth is that Christ has been raised up, the first in a long legacy of those who are going to leave the cemeteries.”³ And because Christ Jesus has been raised from the dead, so too will we.

Paul seemed to understand that we’d need to review the basics when we became confused or afraid of death. Earlier in the same chapter, Paul wrote this: “Friends, let me go over the Message with you one final time.”⁴ After this Paul gives this concise summary of the Gospel, his rock-bottom case for the reality of the resurrection of Jesus: “that the Messiah died for our sins, exactly as Scripture tells it; that he was buried; that he was raised from death on the third day, again exactly as Scripture says; that he presented himself alive to Peter, then to his closest followers, and later to more than five hundred of his followers all at

² John 5:28-29. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

³ 1Corinthians 15:14, 20. The Message.

⁴ 1Corinthians 15:1. Ibid.

the same time.”⁵

And there you have it. The inspired logic and power of the Scriptures, more than 500 eyewitnesses, and more than two thousand years of spiritual witnesses all testify that Jesus was raised from the dead, in both spirit and body. And because Jesus did, so too will we.

There’s song by Carolyn Arends that always brings tears to my eyes as I contemplate the mystery of resurrection. It’s called, “We’ve Been Waiting for You,” and it compares the miracle of birth with crossing over into the resurrection life. The song starts out with the delivery room:

*It must have been so strange to all at once be traveling a journey
All the way to this delivery room
But baby, you are not alone. No, your room is ready, let's go home
You're gonna like it here. Let me make it clear that
We've been waiting for you. We're so glad you came
We've been looking forward to showing you the place
There's so much in store and We've been waiting for you*

And the song ends with a move to the resurrection life:

*Watching you come into this world.
Baby, you've made me believe. Another journey awaits us.
So when I have to leave. I am pretty sure that I'll be frightened
But even if I cry, please understand
I will know I'm not alone. When my room is ready, I'll go home
And when I reach the gate. I'm gonna hear them saying
We've been waiting for you. We're so glad you came
We've been looking forward to showing you the place
There's so much in store and We've been waiting for you*

There may be tears for us as well as we face life’s final moments. There may be some fear. But we won’t be alone. And the grace of Jesus has us covered , in the resurrection life, and in this life as well.

⁵ 1Corinthians 15:3-6. Ibid.

Please take some time now to reflect on your hope in the resurrection and eternal life.



Bill Reinhart, Pastor
pastorbill@buffaloumc.com