

The One Who Defeats Death, the Destroyer of Life

John 11:1-4, 32-44

I so wish I could be with you this morning and we could be together in one place. There is great comfort in familiarity and in community with those I love. But, of course, we cannot be physically together given the epidemic. It is right that we do our part to slow down and put an end to this most unwelcome guest. Even if we could be together, I could not be there this morning, as I am with my family in Mississippi. As I write this, I am seeing my dad through his last days and to his last breath on this earth. By the time Jamie reads this sermon to you, I may have walked with my dad to the completion of his baptism journey and entrusted him to God.

For the last few days, we have been standing around him while he is no longer able to talk and his body slows down. We sing to him songs of our faith, ones we have been singing this Lenten season together, "Jesus, remember me, when You come into Your kingdom." We sing, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound" and tears well up in his eyes and I know for a little while he is with us and being nourished by the faith that has blessed him all his life and now will see him through to the end.

As I sit with my dad, I am reminded that death is a reality that is always present in our lives whether we consciously think about it or not. Sometimes it is not until something threatening enters our lives that we wake up to consider how closely death can walk with us. We understandably do our best to live our lives and to put death out of our mind until we cannot.

This whole virus epidemic is a case in point. We have become aware that the threats to our existence are more real than we might wish to imagine. We may attempt to reassure ourselves that the virus is only a threat to older people and we are not among that group. Or we might attempt to listen to the stories of those who recover even when they were older and tune out the stories of those who did not make it. But death knocks and even if it is knocking on the door to a home down the street, we hear the knock and a chill sets in.

This is true especially with threats to our physical life and to the lives of those we love. But it is also true for those threats to the settled comfortable life we have grown accustomed to living. Call these "little deaths." We live as if life would remain virtually the same, just as we had planned. But this is never the case for very long. As we think about events in our nation, many people now are wondering about the safety and security of their jobs and paychecks. Others are not sure about the security of their stream of income from investments they thought they could count on and now are seeing the markets tumble day after day. Some are not able to be with an older relative as nursing homes close their doors because of the virus. Others stand outside a hospital room waving through the door to a loved one inside, unable to enter to hold their hand because of the infection.

I am telling you that I am angry about these realities. I do not like this one bit. I want to see my dad laughing as he used to and able to have his sound advice in these unsettling times. We want to know that we do not have to fret that the money will be there and that we can live more carelessly with what we have, rather than carefully with what little we have left. We want to know we can embrace those we love and not be held back for fear of what may happen to us or them.

To also be honest, I am find myself angry with Jesus in this story. He is told by the disciples that one of His very best friends is dying and begging that He come and help. What does Jesus do? He decides to wait for a few days before going to see him. When He does go, He says that Lazarus has died and it is all for the glory of God. But where is the glory of God when your friend has died and you did not go when needed?

But then I realized something. This story is a setup to reflect our own experience. We know what it is like to pray to God in hard times and to have to wait and deal with the disappointment that God does not come by our time table. In this story we learn something else: Jesus waits so that we can face the reality of death. He allows it to come just as it inevitably does in this world and in our lives. He allows that destructive power that we know in death of the physical self or in the death to the way of our life to do its work. He allows it not because He does not care, but because He does care. He know death is real and must be faced head-on.

When He does show up, the sisters of dear Lazarus are waiting for him. Their words are not kind words. They are upset. "If You had only come, this would have been stopped." They speak our own words of anger. Why, God, do You allow death the disruptor, the destroyer of what we have to take from us what is most precious to us? Why do You not come and rescue us from what leaves us in pain?

We are told that Jesus becomes emotional. The text is usually translated as "Jesus wept." One of the best biblical scholars I know acknowledges that is a possible translation, but he thinks we are missing the better translation. The other possibility is that Jesus did not weep. No, Jesus is angry. He is angry like we are. He is angry that life can be so hard and change so difficult to embrace. In other words, He is a human being like us. He like us sees suffering and death and hates what it does to who and what we love.

But He does something. He goes to the grave and commands them to do what is unthinkable, "Move the rock away. Move that wall of permanence to the end of what we love out of the way. Lazarus come out!" And there, walking out of the darkness of that cave comes a half-naked man wrapped in a cloth, his eye squinting as he moves from darkness back into the light. He has gone from life to death and now to new life.

This is the rhythm of life. Life, death, new life. It is what God brings to us. Death is real but so is new life. God is not one who saves us from the reality of death. But God is the one who brings us out of the darkness of death into a new life of light. This is the glory of God. Not that He spares us from death, but that He has this way of taking us

back into a new life, a new way of life. This is true in all our losses, be they the unexpected changes in our lives or the death of a loved one.

What we are challenged to do is to let ourselves go into death or change. We are invited to face death the destroyer and believe that death will always be met by Jesus standing outside the tomb of the end of our dreams and commanding boldly for new life to begin.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells about a young man who was struggling to come to grips with the death of several close friends. As he grieved, an experience from his childhood came to his mind. He told Barbara that when he was a child he used to go down to a nearby river with some older boys. He would watch them swing far out over the fast-moving water on a rope tied to the branch of a tree. He watched them arc across the sky and then let go of the rope, falling into the river. Eventually their heads would break the surface and they would swim back to the shore.

The older boys urged him to do it. He grasped the rope, got a running start, and swung far out over the water. At the height of his ride he willed his hands to let go of the rope, but they would not. He was paralyzed by fear. He had watched the others boys do it, but he could not comprehend what gave them the ability to let go of the rope. So he hung there until the others pulled him to the riverbank.

It took many attempts before the boy was able to let go, but when he did, it was because of his friends. They had gone ahead of me, he said, I had watched each of them let go and finally I just made up my mind that if they could do it, I could do it, too. So eventually he opened his hands and let go, because he wanted to join those who had gone before him.

So this is the invitation of this Lent to let go and walk the way of the cross, to face death and trust what lies behind the stone door and what will emerge out into the light of a new day. This is a reality I am experiencing as I walk to face death with my dad. This is our reality together as we wonder what will emerge out of this crisis our nation and world faces in the epidemic.

May we be Mary in our story. For Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in Me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in Me will never die. Do you believe this?"

"Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world." Amen.