

LET'S TALK ABOUT DEATH

Preached by Deacon Vicki Gray, Diocese of California
Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 2, 2017

*To set the mind on the flesh is death,
but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.*

Now there's a happy thought for a nice spring day - Death. At least Paul's prescription for dealing with it is a happy one. "Stop fretting about death," he tells the Romans. "Set your mind on the Spirit – the Holy Spirit – and live life peacefully...joyfully." Keep your eye on the eternal, do right, and all will be well. Don't worry, be happy. It's spring. Go catch a ball game. Go smell the daffodils.

Unfortunately, our other readings – John's Gospel about Lazarus and the one you didn't hear- about Ezekial and all those dry bones - keep dragging us back to thoughts of death...tempered, to be sure, by reminders of resurrection.

So, let's talk about death...half of that old saw – There are only two certainties in life – death and taxes...the latter little more than a week away. And, for folks my age, the former not too far behind.

Actually, there's a third certainty. The fifth Sunday of Lent, you can be reasonably sure it will be the deacon or associate priest you'll hear preaching. Next Sunday – Palm Sunday – we'll preach to each other, acting out our roles in that powerful Passion Gospel. And, Sunday after next, Easter Sunday, it's the rector's chance to shine, preaching to the resurrected who will join us. If a deacon's to earn her keep, to pull her preaching load this time of year, there are but two Sundays, when doing so becomes an imperative – the Sunday after Easter, when an exhausted rector takes a deserved break after Holy Week...or today, the Sunday before Palm Sunday when, perforce, the Gospel is always about Lazarus.

Truth be told, Mother Susan offered me an out. We could talk today about "Radical Welcome"...and we *will* in a few weeks...we *must*. But, I turned down the offer. There's something personal I need to say today...and I will in a few minutes.

I've preached this Sunday many times and every year struggle to find some new way to approach this old story. Do we focus on the grief we all feel – as Jesus did – on the death of a loved one? Do we try to tackle our own fear of death, our legitimate doubts about what – if anything – awaits us on the other side? Or do we examine the words of John in terms of what's about to happen in the life of Christ. Let's try to do all three.

First the words we just heard in the Gospel...and those we didn't hear. As is often the case, those unheard verses just before the morning's Gospel are important sources of context and added meaning. This morning, for example, we heard Jesus – the God of theologians – speaking about how he was going to use Lazarus' death as a teachable moment to reinforce the belief of the disciples. But, at the scene – in Bethany – Jesus, our human brother, is confronted by Mary, weeping, probably shouting "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." And

he succumbed to very human grief and perhaps to what we know as “survivor’s guilt.” “Greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved,” he “began to weep.”

There were, of course, very human reasons why he might have been late. As we would have heard in John 10, he was hiding out from the Pharisees on the other side of the Jordan when he got the news of Lazarus’ illness. And the trek from Jericho to Bethany on the outskirts of Jerusalem - all uphill, through rugged desert – could easily have taken four days.

The disciples tried to warn him of the danger he was marching into. After all, he was hiding out because the Pharisees had just tried to stone him and arrest him. Surely, Jesus knew what awaited him in Jerusalem. The disciples did too, witness Thomas – “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” But the Jesus who is God was on a divine mission. And, surrounded by the crowd drawn by his raising of Lazarus, he continued on to Jerusalem...to the hosannas...and the waiting jaws of death. For it was the nature of this ultimate miracle that was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Confounded by the magnitude and portent of the miracle and alarmed by how it had swelled the ranks of the Jesus Movement, the Pharisees decided that the time had come to put an end to it. They put into motion their plot to kill Jesus, thus setting the stage for Palm Sunday and Holy Week.

But, before continuing our annual shared journey to Jerusalem, let me turn to that matter of grief...to the loss of a loved one and the pain that endures.

For T.S. Eliot, “April is the cruelest month, breeding lilacs out of the dead land, mixing memory and desire, stirring dull roots with spring rain.” And, for me, this is its cruelest week.

It was this Fifth Sunday of Lent – eleven years ago, now – that I first preached on Lazarus...at St. James in San Francisco. My dog – a shaggy, floppy-eared Tibetan terrier named Salsa – was dying. I carried her to church and laid her in a sunny spot in the undercroft...and then went upstairs to preach. Having completed that duty, I then took her to the emergency vet in Cordelia, where we said goodbye.

And, seventeen years ago today, Mimi and I sat together for the last time where you are – in the pews – listening to someone else talk about Lazarus, as she was dying. On Saturday, she did die. Outside, an ice cream truck, surrounded by a crowd of happy kids, was blaring its bouncy jingle – “Do Your Ears Hang Low.” And I was left alone that night with my cry of anguish in a darkened, empty house.

Don’t believe those who will tell you “You’ll get over it.” And don’t – please don’t – follow the well-meant advice of Christina Rossetti:

And afterwards remember, do not grieve:
For if the darkness and corruption leave
A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,
Better by far you should forget and smile
Than that you should remember and be sad.

What would be *better by far* would be to heed the words of Joy Davidman, the wife of C.S. Lewis – Jack Lewis - who, during a happy day in their shared struggle with cancer, told him: “The pain then is part of this happiness now. That’s the deal.” After she was gone, Jack remembered the happiness then...and the love. “Why love,” he asked, “if losing it hurts so

much? I have no answers anymore: only the life I have lived. Twice in that life I've been given the choice: as a boy and as a man. The boy chose safety, the man chooses suffering. The pain now is part of the happiness then. That's the deal."

That's the deal. Don't believe those who tell you you'll get over it. You won't. The pain may recede; it may morph...from the throbbing, sometimes stabbing pain in the chest, the lump in the throat, the difficulty swallowing...to an ever-present, seemingly controlled memory that can trigger tears when least expected. Losing the one you love, to paraphrase Lewis, is like losing a limb. You'll get an artificial leg. You'll learn to walk again. But you'll always walk with a limp.

And that's okay...even good. Embrace your grief...the grief that will come into every life. It honors your love and proves, as we learned in Corinthians 13, that love does not die. Grieve. Remember the happiness. Live with the love.

But what about our fear, as we contemplate the end of our own life? How can we live with the doubts...doubts too fearsome to grapple with or even contemplate? Will it be painful? What's on the other side – if anything? Is God there, waiting to welcome us face-to-face – or is death merely darkness, nothingness, the end of being. Is this religion thing just a cruel hoax? Is my faith too shallow? These are the sorts of questions that Paul Tillich, a theologian who mixed his Christianity with existentialist philosophy, had in mind when he talked about our Ultimate Concern – Who is God? Who are we? How do we have our being? To what end?

These are questions that trouble everyone...questions with which even Christians – maybe *especially* Christians – are called to struggle. They're questions *this* Christian has struggled with...often...last week...my head on a pillow in a darkened bedroom...seeking sleep...the questions crowding in, becoming doubts, as I contemplated my own death, probably alone, maybe in the sleep I sought. Then, unbidden, I felt a tear roll across the bridge of my nose...and found myself in conversation with the God, who, but a moment before, I had doubted. I remembered that faith is not having a concrete, definitive answer firmly in hand and resting; it is learning to live with doubt and embrace the question.

I remembered, too, my riff, in an earlier sermon - on Eugene O'Neill's play "Lazarus Laughed" - in which Lazarus, who knows what's on the other side, confronts Caligula, frozen by his fear of death. I, too, wanted to laugh... but, thinking of the dog and cat at my feet, just smiled, and drifted off to sleep.

So how are we to live with the question and, overcoming our fears, live with the joy that comes from faith and hope? First, it helps to face the question squarely and come to grips with our own mortality. Remember, nobody gets out of this alive. No matter how good the next anti-aging cream they come up with is, we're all going to die. That's the deal.

There remain, of course, the other questions – When? And how? I've often thought about that last question. How? Suddenly, unexpectedly, painlessly in one's sleep...but robbed of the chance to prepare all the temporal odds and ends left behind...and, most importantly, the chance to say goodbye? Or, as was the case with Mimi, Jack Lewis' Joy, and so many others, at an increasingly time-certain end of a long, slow illness.

Fact is, those choices – when and how – are never ours to make. And some, like an Oscar Romero, a soldier in Afghanistan, or a toddler darting into the street to fetch a ball, may

die in violent ways both painful and blessedly sudden. So, how to be ready for that thief in the night?

A little book that's meant a lot to me— in addition to Lewis' *A Grief Observed* - is Stephen Levine's *A Year to Live*. The sub-title says it all: "How to Live This Year as If It Were Your Last." He might just as easily have said "How to live this *moment* as if it were your last"... living fully, joyfully, in the present moment, using it and every moment to tell those you love how much you love them, to tell those you've harmed how sorry you are, to be at peace with God, and, yes, to pause and smell the daffodils...or summer's roses.

Setting a limit, however artificial, on what remains of our allotted time also has a way of focusing our attention on all the little things that will be big things for those we leave behind – you know, an up-to-date will, insurance contacts, an advanced medical directive, our thoughts for Mother Susan and Jeanne about the readings and music for the celebration of our life. Doing that early, getting it out of the way, will free us up to live each moment joyfully, perhaps to tick off the longed-for experiences on some bucket list, to set our minds – uncluttered by thoughts of death - on the Spirit that is life and peace.

As we walk with Jesus these next two painful weeks...from Bethany to Jerusalem...let us not lose sight of the of the joy that is the promise of Easter – resurrection and eternal life. And, at the end of *our* journey, may we look back on a temporal life in which the regrets have been few and the joys many. May we count not the time spent on some mundane job or fruitless debate, but rather the time spent with those we loved, with those in need, with friends once enemies. As we pass from the temporal to the eternal, may we be able to say "I tried, Lord, I tried." And, taking the hand on the other side, may we hear the voice of God, "I know, my child, I know."

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