

2016_03_27 Resurrection | Sermon
Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
Pastor David Pfeiffer

John 20:15

Jesus said to her,
“Woman, why are you weeping?
Whom are you seeking?”

**The Resurrected Jesus Stands in the Face of Death
And Speaks Truth to the World**

INI

Grace to you and peace from Him who is, and who was, and who is to come. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Death is the ultimate truth. It cannot be escaped. And when death strikes, suddenly truth matters. It matters so deeply that it moves us to tears, it makes us feel pain, it troubles and disturbs us.

We’ve been discussing this question of truth in Bible Class for the last month or so. Very few Americans believe that it is right for any religion to claim to have the exclusive truth. To many, it is just a matter of opinion; it is unknowable. However, there remains one undeniable truth that is beyond opinion. Even the devout atheist cannot deny it: death is real.

Philosophers can raise endless debates about God and morality and the Bible – but there remains one issue that is undebatable: human beings die and when they are dead, they are no longer living. Life and death are fundamentally distinct. So death remains the ultimate truth; a truth that in one way or another, we are all preparing for.

Still, there was not much that could have prepared me for it. It was the first time I had experienced someone close to me die. I remember standing in that hospital room, Grandma Schierenbeck was laying there on the bed. She was dear to me. The kindest, most humble, most caring Christian woman I had

ever met. But now she was soon to be gone. They had removed the tubes, unplugged the machines. It was only a matter of time. She was in a coma now and there I sat and watched. Every few moments, her body would call out for another breath. I was faced with the ultimate truth – she was going to die; death was real; and it was time to face it.

Death is the ultimate truth, and when it strikes, truth matters. God matters. How many a young parent, struck by sudden tragedy, loses a child, and where they had not so much thought about God's place in their lives, suddenly without restraint is crying out to God; stirred with disturbing thoughts, questions, and sadness.

God suddenly matters, because as much as death proves the truth of our fleeting existence, life proves God's enduring existence. So death does something to us that definitely relates to God. It does something that no atheist can deny. It is heard in the sorrows of young parents, it is seen in the pain on the widow's face, it is felt in the searching questions of a young woman who has come to the tomb expecting to mourn the loss of someone so dear to her.

So Mary stands outside the tomb. She is confused. The truth of Jesus' death was inescapable. She stood by as he hung and bled from that cross. She listened as he cried out "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" She watched as his body called out for that last breath. And she followed as they took down his limp, lifeless body, wrapped it in cloths, carried it away down the garden path, laid it in the tomb, and sealed out the world with a great stone. As she wakes that morning, and heads out to the tomb in the darkness, she must face the truth. She must do what she can. She will anoint his body with scented oils; she will offer him the best she can; to say good bye; she will face it.

But when she gets there, there is nothing to face. There is no body. The stone is rolled away. The tomb was bare. She is filled with distress, where have they taken him? She is so distraught that she doesn't even seem recognize the two angels that speak with her. And when she turns to see the one she seeks standing right in front of her, it is as if she doesn't know him at

all. And he asks her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?"

This world can so distress us. The truth of death does distress us; the loss of a loved one can so much so that a person can find himself not even thinking straight: distressed, depressed, distracted. We can see it written in the words of the world's dying wishes.

In New Orleans, on the side of an old boarded up building, there stands a wall covered with people's dying wishes. It is the work of artist Candy Chang. She has stenciled the unfinished statement across the top in chalkboard paint, "Before I die, I want to..." And random people come along and write their thoughts. "Before I die, I want to... plant a tree." "Before I die, I want to... straddle the international date line." "Before I die, I want to... sail around the world ... go skydiving ... visit Amsterdam ... explore another culture." "Before I die, I want to... make a difference; fulfill my purpose; see the world become a better place; be completely myself."

Ms. Chang meant it as a way to help people share their grief. She wanted people to stop their busy lives and think about what really mattered. She wanted people to see death as a part of life. So she began this project of painting these collages on the side of abandoned buildings. "Before I die I want to..." And there in New Orleans we can see it written in the words of the world's dying wishes.

Now, we can agree there is a genuinely romantic feeling to it. In many ways, it is heart warming. And for many people it is therapeutic. But ultimately, what are we really saying?

The world readily admits that death is the ultimate truth, but the best it can offer to those who grieve is a variety of ways to cope with it. It is written all over that wall. A sort of therapy for death. Its a collage of all the different ways we can keep ourselves busy; do the things we want to do before its too late; see our wishes come true. It reflects a world that is in distress, trying to cope, trying to wish for something different, but having no sense of how we all fit together in this picture.

In some ways, it is not much different than the Epicurean philosophy. The Epicureans didn't believe there was an after life or a resurrection. They thought the best philosophy is to enjoy life while you can. So in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul agrees with them. He writes, "If the resurrection of Christ is not true, then 'let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'" (15:17,32). That is the truth of life, if Christ is not risen. As the Epicureans used to say, "Let us celebrate! Let us fill our days with the wishes of our hearts!" It is the only reasonable way to prepare for death, if indeed there is no resurrection from the dead. How else could we face the loss, the pain, the sorrow of the end.

I can remember times in college where that was the basic attitude. It was as if the college days were just years to be throw away. Have fun while you can, because when you get older, there is no more fun.

This is the reason so many of our youth are feeling lost, or just have no real interest in questions about God. We are losing sight of the bigger story. We are seeing little beyond what is happening today and what is on TV tonight. We slip into thinking that life is nothing more than the moment; this pleasure, this accomplishment, this job, that thing. Candy Chang was right about one thing: its time we stop our busy lives to think about what really matters.

And all of a sudden I found myself thinking about what really matters. I watched my grandma lying on the hospital bed; every few moments she called out for a breath of air. The truth of it was arresting, captivating. If this is to be the end of the story, then indeed, we should be sure to enjoy what we can; to get as much out of life as possible; to fulfill my life's purpose.

But there he stands, right in the face of death: "Whom are you seeking?" Whom are we seeking indeed? The truth of this question is takes captive all the world's philosophers and theologians and thinkers and seekers. For the question of truth in the face of death is the question of all questions.

And there he stands. Who is he? Is he real? What has happened to the body of Jesus? Where has he taken the body of

Jesus? If we can just find the body of Jesus then we will have some answers to life's most significant questions.

This is why Apologist Ken Samples calls the resurrection "the most dangerous idea." What he means is that all truth rests in whether or not the resurrection of Jesus really happened. Skeptics, agnostics, athiests – they all have objections. They all have reasons why they do not believe it to be true. They point to supposed contradictions; they contrive conspiracy theories; they discredit historical witnesses. But ultimately, when these objections are put to the test, they really don't stand. In a court of law, the evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of attesting to truth of the resurrection.

There are thousands of copies of NT writings attesting to this witness. That Jesus actually rose from the dead and was seen by hundreds of people during the 40 days before he ascended into heaven. In the end the argument really boils down to one thing: is a resurrection possible. Those who object may throw out their reasoning, but ultimately, when shown all the historical evidence in favor of it, have to say to the jury, "well, that's impossible."

Its like the farmer and the giraffe. A farmer worked many years on the farm with pigs, horses, cows, and chickens. One day a friend brought the farmer to the circus where he showed him a yellow and brown spotted animal with a long neck and said, "look, a giraffe!" The farmer looked skeptically at the animal and responded, "There ain't no such animal."

It is like an agnostic I know. He grew up in the Lutheran church, went to church every Sunday, was confirmed, even graduated from ILC; but now he says he doesn't know if God is real or not. So he told me, "If God would just give me a sign that proved to me that he is real, then I would believe."

The evidence is clear, and people can look right at it, but that doesn't mean they will see it. You can't prove this truth to them. In the end, it comes down to the question of whether or not a person believes God has done this. Is a resurrection possible? Is there is a bigger story? And when we see it, whether we will believe God has done this or not.

That is why the resurrection is the most dangerous idea. It confronts us with our mortality, our sinfulness, the reality of our death and the presence of God's saving work for us in His Son. It testifies to the truth that Jesus is the Son of God. And this is a great risk for us. For it is all or nothing. And it completely changes how we look at the world, how we look at church, how we look at God.

So we turn with Mary, to see him. Standing there in the face of death and we say its not possible. We say, it is the gardener. We say, "Sir, tell me where you have taken him." And if this were the end of the story, then we are still in our sins. We have no hope, but to simply try accomplish what we want our of life before we die.

Until he speaks. He must speak to us, for there is no other way we will believe him. And he says: "Mary." He calls you by name. Without that word from him, we would still be looking for him. But there He stands in the face of death and he calls you by your name; calls you to believe; to live a new life; to know a new story where God is present in his creation, living, creating, working, speaking, calling you my your name.

This is the truth that captivates us. It is unlike any other religion or any other false claim to God. For this is the story from beginning to beginning without end. And when he calls your name, he calls you into his witness. Into his forgiveness, his life, his salvation, his calling. You are now a witness to Jesus' resurrection every day.

We can do nothing more than offer a witness to this truth. We cannot prove it anymore than we can prove that God exists. We can only offer a witness, a testimony of what we have seen, what we have heard, what Jesus has done. Now we stand in the face of death and speak truth to the world.

I found myself facing the truth of it. She was going to die. But it was in the face of that truth that I witnessed something I will never forget. There were close to ten of us scattered around the room, leaning, sitting, waiting. And slowly her body began to call for oxygen less and less. Until there was one last breath

and it was over. But there in the face of death, Grandpa Schierenbeck stood up and said, "I'd like us to sing the doxology."

There from that hospital room, in the face of death, was a small group of Christians speaking truth to the world. It filled the room; it echoed down the hallways; it was hope. We were taking part in God's greater story, one that has no end. And that is what changes everything for us as Christians. It makes each day, a day of hope, a day of joy, a day of God's living presence in our lives. Because the resurrection enables us to stand in the face of sin, death, the devil and every evil and trial, and sing:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise Him all creatures here below;
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Death is the ultimate truth, a reality which no one can deny. Yet, Jesus is the hidden truth which no one can live without. And when we are confronted with that question, whom are you seeking, His resurrection is the most dangerous idea. It brings us face to face with death; and with Jesus, every day, our words and actions testify of this truth, a truth that the world needs now more than ever. Amen.