



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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For God's Sake and Yours, Come Out!

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, April 6, 2014
The Fifth Sunday in Lent—Based on John 11:1-45*

Dying has always seemed like a real and present possibility to me. For example, I didn't take to water skiing as quickly as most of my friends did. Rather than thinking about those good looking hunks and gorgeous chicks at Cyprus Gardens, I found myself thinking about snakes in the lake and the possibility of drowning, not from going under so much as from drinking a lethal amount of the lake water which was rushing into my mouth as I struggled to stand up on those stupid little boards. It was slightly better learning to snow ski; I knew that at least I was unlikely to fall into a nest of snakes; there are so few snow snakes (hard even to say). But in both cases, the possibility of dying was never far from mind. I shared this with my friends at the time, who told me to my astonishment that not everyone feels that way. Oops. Over time I have found that sharing everything with everyone is not always the best way to go.

I am exaggerating a little, of course, but in all seriousness I do think about death a good bit. Years ago Ernest Becker's seminal work, *The Denial of Death*, made me feel some better, claiming that everyone thinks of death, that in fact death, one way or another, is front and center in human consciousness. Our response to the inevitability of it, he said, shapes our lives, our psychological make-up; indeed, that confronting death, either through denial or its opposite, determines how well we can live with ourselves and with others while we are alive.

Death has been particularly present this week as I have presided at one funeral and prepared to do so at another tomorrow. In neither case is the deceased young enough to justify rage, but also in neither case is anyone happy to say goodbye. A close friend of a friend received a terrible diagnosis this week with an almost certain prognosis. Another, one very near to me, continues to struggle with immense courage toward an uncertain outcome but with unmistakable weariness from the brutality of the treatment. The power of addiction reared its head in the case of another, at this moment allowing addiction to claim victory over life.

You have your stories just as I have mine, and none of us will deny that death is as real as life. This morning we have heard the account from John of Jesus' raising Lazarus, his good friend, from the dead. It is a beloved story, beloved for many reasons—its unspeakable hope for us, its reporting that Jesus cried real tears just like us, its claim that in the end death and darkness do not win.

It is a story which has the power to change our lives immensely for the good if we allow it to, if we read it as a parable about the real meaning of life and death; but if we insist at any level that it is a literal account, my experience is that eventually it will leave us empty and disappointed, doing us more harm than good by setting us up to have unrealistic expectations. This is a parable, a metaphor, which addresses meaning—meaning that can change our lives, meaning that goes beyond a one-off, even if spectacular, miracle. This parable tells us that life and love and goodness win; and when we dig even more deeply into its meaning, what we learn is that this truth survives whether we physically die or not. With my own eyes, I have witnessed people living fully to the end of their lives when the run up to their physical death was easy and when it was slow and painful. This is a story about how to be genuinely alive now; it claims for us the truth that resurrection, like eternal life, is not a reward at the time of our death but a path of life that God wants for us now and for every day of our lives. As Nora Gallagher writes so beautifully, we "practice" resurrection every day, living it for it is the life God calls us to.

And, yet, we know that death before its time exists all around us. Our great challenge is to live while we live, refusing to die before we need to. You know what I am talking about; we all do. Some among us show signs of the dead, those whose lives and choices have brought them quite literally to the brink of death; and then there are those, in some ways the saddest of all, who look quite alive but are not.

- ❖ The young executive who has everything—great looks, large bonuses, a handsome, smart and successful man at her side. It is all perfect except that she is terrified that at any moment she will be found out, exposed for the fearful overachiever she secretly believes herself to be;
- ❖ The father, who for all the world looks like the perfect family man, but whose inner life is consumed by a secret life of sexual addiction and pornography;
- ❖ The minister whose faith is all show, shattered by life's ups and downs and untended by a life of religious busyness and too little prayer.

In our culture of too much of everything, the dead often walk about, pretending to be alive and looking for ways to *feel* alive even when they know they are not. This, I fear, is the real epidemic in our culture.

The incredible Good News of this wonderful story is that the dead do not have to remain dead. The claim of this story is that resurrection *is*—that it exists; my hope is that it also *will be* in some form in the next life. But the only empirical evidence for resurrection is that it *is now*—for I have seen those who were once dead and who are now alive. In fact, on occasion I too have been dead and have by the grace of God become alive again. And so have you.

If Lent is worth anything to us this or any year, it is a time when we seek to identify the tomb to which we are most attracted. Where do we hide from being alive? Is our tomb one of success, one accumulation after another? This one looks like a cathedral, adorned with more than we could have imagined. The problem for us in this tomb is that each new hit of success takes us a shorter distance each time, a drug with diminishing power. When is enough enough? Or is ours a tomb that is in some ways the opposite of that, the tomb of disappointment, the place that never allows us to be satisfied with where we are? Sometimes in life what we have done is what we have done; and though it is not rewarded grandly with the signs of societal success, it is good and solid and soiled only by our inability to accept the truth about ourselves. Or is our tomb the tomb of fear and cynicism? Life in this tomb is lived from the assumption that all that is to be already is and that the world—ours and everyone else's—can only get worse. The mantra in this tomb is “it's just one thing after another and none of it is good.” We rarely get hurt or disappointed in this tomb because we expect so little of life; it is a sad and lifeless place.

With all my heart I believe that ours is a God who calls us forth: “Come out from that place that holds you back; be unbound and live again.”

What is your tomb? What is mine? And why on earth do we stay there?

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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