

FROM DEATH TO LIFE

TEXT: Matthew 28:16-20

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on May 1, 2022

Ah, nothing like a warm, sunny day at the end of April in the third week of Easter to worship outdoors and talk about death! And yet, this lovely spring day is only possible because some things have died.

Birds sing and dart through the trees only because they successfully hunted and ate bugs and worms. The hawks that routinely perch on our steeple and bless us with their graceful flight live because the quick bunnies and scampering squirrels are sometimes not quite quick enough for the talons of the hawk. And the rabbits and squirrels are there for the taking because some flowers became a salad and some acorns never became oaks. The flowers that do blossom into beauty and the oaks that do grow to give us shade have only done so because a seed broke apart underground and allowed something new to emerge.

There are many other examples, but as we begin three weeks of talking about how we as human beings can participate in God's work of resurrection—of turning death into life—I wanted to start by pointing out that the resurrection of Jesus on Easter was not the first time God showed human beings the core truth that death is necessary to life. I'm firmly in the camp that believes God's first revelation was Creation itself, and the truth that life comes from death is as central to the workings of the natural world as the death and resurrection of Jesus is to Christian faith.

Jesus' resurrection is gospel—good news. But it is not, technically, **new** news. It is expanded news. What the empty tomb taught is that the cycles of death and life so evident in the natural world are extended to the world of the Spirit. I believe that, too, has been the case since the beginning, but we didn't have a way of knowing it until Jesus made the spiritual reality manifest in the flesh in his own death, resurrection, and ascension. I'm sure someone has been burned at the stake for saying that, so do your own due diligence on the concept. But that's what I believe.

Life and death are the yin and yang of creation, right down to the cellular level. Every day our own skin cells die and new ones are regenerated. That process takes longer as we age, with the skin of a baby replacing itself every 14 days and the skin of someone my age taking up to 84 days. But can you imagine if new skin cells grew without the old ones dying off? I mean, just the weight of it. It's hard enough getting out of bed as it is!

Death is actually a sign of belonging. Our own mortality is a sign that we are fully human and fully part of all God has made. We can't fully embrace life unless we also embrace death. Embracing death doesn't mean death is devoid of pain or grief, that we should run right out and kill ourselves, or pray to become martyrs. But it does mean that the failure to accept death's necessary role in life will cause us serious problems, both as individuals and as a society.

Our desire to fight death has actually caused more of it; and has inflicted more pain and suffering than would otherwise have been the case. I'm willing to bet that those whose groceries regularly include *perishable* items live longer than those who eat only from the *non-perishable* aisles. Sure, it's great that I can still use the Tupperware containers that I got as a wedding gift 41 years ago, but as of 2018 there were 5.25 trillion pieces of plastic in the world's oceans. Gorging on that plastic is killing off marine life at an alarming pace. But it gets far worse.

A scientific journal in the Netherlands reported last month that they have detected microplastics in human blood for the first time. Previously, microplastics have been found in human feces, placenta, and lung

tissue. Such particles are in our air, food, and water as well as in consumer goods like toothpaste, cosmetics, and tattoo ink. We haven't even begun to fathom what having microplastics in our organs and bloodstream is doing to our bodies. Paul called the human body the temple of the Holy Spirit. Like every other place on earth, we are filling that temple with plastic—the thing that does not decompose; the thing that cannot die is killing us.

Just two weeks ago the BBC had an article in their Sky at Night magazine about the growing hazard of space junk for the International Space Station, weather and communication satellites, and our ability to observe space from earth. Debris crashing into satellites can shatter and cause more debris; and if it happens enough, entire regions of space will be unusable and impassable for decades. If our GPS devices stop working because of too much space junk, Boston also will be impassable for decades.

Everything God created has a lifespan—billions of years for stars, mayflies get a mere 24 hours. Mayflies can, however, lay up to 10,000 eggs. So, there's that. Indigenous peoples around the world build communities and nations around a deep and connected understanding of those beginnings and endings. But we settler types seem fixated on creating things that are immortal. In religious terms, we are creating our own gods. In biblical terms, those are called idols, and our idols may well kill us off as a species. In trying to save our lives; we will lose them.

There's nothing wrong with wanting to live a long, healthy life. Finding a way to deal with our plastics problem would surely help with that. But our idolatry doesn't stop with the creation of deathless objects. Some of the most painful deathbed scenes I have witnessed are when family members gather around a loved one, who is still living in biological terms only, and anguish over whether or not to pull the plug. Were we a society that could embrace death, we could more easily recognize and accept when a life has ended.

Were we not so afraid of our own death or so insistent on clinging to the physical presence of our loved ones, when they are more than ready to embrace death themselves, we could have more opportunities to see the grace-filled moments as a person slips from their earthly bonds into the gentle arms of God. And how much suffering have we added to our society by insisting that only youth has value and that our elders should be discarded unless they can pay the rest of us enough to care? We will not let them die; but neither will we let them live.

When Jesus tells his disciples that following him means taking up a cross and that those who want to save their lives will lose them while those who lose their lives will find them, it is that central yin and yang of creation that he is talking about. Some version of that saying also appears in both Luke and John and this is actually the second time Jesus says it in Matthew. In all of them, Jesus is clearly referencing his own suffering and death to come. But, more importantly, he is dispelling the notion that the difficult and painful road he is about to take is something that his followers don't have to consider.

In Matthew's version, Jesus has just told his disciples that he is going to Jerusalem to suffer, be killed, and rise again. Peter takes Jesus aside and says, Nonsense! That's not going to happen to you! Jesus rebukes Peter, actually calling him Satan, and then tells all the disciples that not only is it indeed going to happen to him, but that they can expect the same for themselves. In fact, they should not only expect it for themselves, it's a necessary choice for those who want to follow Jesus.

One of the biggest and most destructive lies that Christians have ever told each other is that signing up to follow Jesus is some kind of get-out-of-jail free card. Be a Christian and be wealthy! Have all your diseases miraculously healed! No more bad luck! Nothing can hurt you! When Peter suggests such a thing, Jesus calls him Satan.

The way of Christ is the way of the Cross, because death is a necessary part of being human and our mental and spiritual health begins with recognizing and accepting that. It's worth noting that this is a very earth-bound passage. The word for life here references biological life, not eternal life.

Sometimes verse 26 is translated "For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but lose their soul?" but that can give the verses an other-worldly sense that the Greek doesn't have. It's the same Greek word throughout this section, *psyche*, the root of our word psychology. It means the animating life force of all created things, human and animal alike. "Soul" isn't a bad translation if you don't think of "soul" in immortal terms. There's a different Greek word for the spirit that lives on after death.

The passage is not saying that if you give up your biological life for Jesus, you'll gain eternal life. That might be true; but this passage isn't talking about that. Jesus is saying that the fulness of life *on this earth* is gained by embracing the fact that pain, suffering, and eventually death is part of the package. That is the truth about creation, human and otherwise, so we can't call ourselves followers of the truth if we can't accept the world as God has made it. Is there another kind of life that transcends death? Absolutely. But we have to live this one first; and this one is finite. Discipleship begins with the embrace of that boundary.

And while accepting our own mortality is the 800-lb gorilla in the room, there are also many lesser deaths that we refuse to embrace to our detriment. We cling to relationships, jobs, and ideas even when they have proven themselves to be toxic. The death we are refusing to embrace in those cases might be the fact that we are capable of major mistakes or that there are things in addition to physical existence that can pass a point of no return.

I just finished a book on the psychology of hope which made the paradoxical point that hopelessness was actually a gateway *out of* despair. The author, a Jesuit priest named William Lynch, argued that until we can recognize a situation as hopeless, that this particular thing is over, we can't leave it and move on to something better. That is a form of embracing death in order to live.

I've run into people who are paralyzed in making decisions because to choose one path is to cut off the other options. Even when we change course down the road—we change careers; we find a more suitable partner; we move to that place we've always wanted to live—we can't go back and have life as it might have been if we had never made that first choice to begin with. We can always start again; but we can never truly start over.

And in order to have that new start, we have to embrace the death of what we leave behind. It might have been a natural and necessary death or it might have been tragic; but there will be no life in the new direction until we have honored, embraced, and lovingly buried the old. The bane and blessing of living a life bound by time is that while we are here, we can only move forward. Every second the world is different than it was the second before; every moment there is both death and birth; for hope to exist, we need them both.

The embrace of death as the way to life is the beating heart of Christian faith. It's why Holy Week is the central celebration of the Christian year and we enact its truth every time we turn the broken body and shed blood of Jesus into bread and wine to feed the world. Take up your cross, said Jesus. Embrace death. Take, eat, this is my body, broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me. Amen.