

I Hope I'm Alive When I'm Die

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr.

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“And Jesus wept.” The shortest verse of Scripture, and along with John 3:16, most likely one of the first verses many of us memorized in Sunday School lo those many years ago. Speaking of which, I specifically remember my Sunday School teacher telling me Jesus was mourning the death of his friend, AND I specifically remember not buying any of it. I mean, if Jesus is the Son of God, and he knows he’s going to resuscitate Lazarus, why the tears? And furthermore, why the tears when Mr. Compassion takes his own sweet time to go to Lazarus’ family.

About 8 or 9 years ago now, I got a call at 3 something in the morning that my friend Barry had died. I sat up in bed and asked Peggy if she was alone. She said no. The paramedics were getting ready to leave, but one officer and the police chaplain were still present. I told her I would be there in the next 30 minutes. I took 5-10 minutes to get ready and dressed and it took me another 15 minutes to get to her house. What I did not do was sit around for 2 days twiddling my thumbs. Anybody want to guess how long you’d keep me here at Peace if I sat around for 2 days before responding to a death? Let’s be honest here: Jesus would have failed pastoral theology 101 in seminary.

The disciples, however, are delighted he’s seems to have no interest. You see, they were worried he might actually try to visit the family who lived in Judea where they had almost gotten stoned. And since they didn’t want to meet Lazarus’ fate, they were quite comfortable with Jesus’ lack of urgency.

Mary and Martha, however, are more than a tad miffed about Jesus’ lack of urgency. In fact, Jesus never he gets to the house before Martha comes marching down the street. In the common vernacular, I think she told Jesus that if he had had his mess together, then none of this would have happened. And who can blame her for being upset? After all, in the patriarchal first century, an unmarried woman without a man in her life was as good as dead.

But eventually Mr. Slowpoke heads to the cemetery. And there in that place we are told Jesus became “greatly disturbed in spirit & was deeply moved.” What isn’t so easy to hear in the English translation is Jesus’ anger although it is quite present in the Greek. So what exactly is disturbing Jesus’ spirit? And why is he angry? What is he angry about or at? Looking at the text closer, Jesus asks “Where have they laid him?” And the people respond, “Come and See.” Then and only then does Jesus weep.

I hope I can make this point clearly enough. “Come and see” is Jesus’ phrase in the Gospel of John. In John 1 Jesus invites his first disciples to “Come and See.” “Come and See” is the phrase by which Jesus invites his disciples to come and see light, to come and experience life as God wants us to experience it. But here in the story the roles are reversed and we ask Jesus to come and see. But we don’t ask him to come and see life. We invite him to come and see death. Come and see how it pulls our strings. Come and see our obsession with and fear of death. Then and only then, after we have invited Jesus to see our response to death does Jesus weep in anger.

What motivated the disciples fears of going to Judea? Their fear of dying. What motivated Mary and Martha? Their fear of death and their fear of the consequences of death. What motivates us? In 2009 health care devoured 1.25 trillion dollars or around 17% of the GNP. Look at the anxiety that the 2010 healthcare plan created. And notice I'm not addressing whether it was a good bill, or whether it should have included a single payee system or whether it's within the government's role. Rather, I'm looking at the anxiety and the histrionics. It was as if the apocalypse was upon us. Whenever the emotional response is incongruent with the content, there's more going on that meets the eye. So you tell me; what motivates us? In the face of death we continue to create new technologies which keep our bodies alive longer and longer. And yet, while the tide seems to be turning, some doctors keep "forgetting" to call Hospice. Why? Because in the minds of so many death means failure.

At the very first church I served in upstate NY, I took the children's Sunday School classes to the funeral home that was literally across the street. Who freaked out? Well it wasn't the kids. The kids were fascinated. The adults I had to talk off the ledge.

As I said last Sunday night, John loves irony. John would love the irony that a society as obsessed as ours with inflicting death and simultaneously keeping it at a distance, is a society that fails to live in so many ways. I think my Sunday School teacher was wrong. Jesus didn't weep for Lazarus. After all, there are worse things than dying. I think Jesus wept for us. I think he wept for us when he saw all of the ways that death pulls our strings. He weeps for a world that has forgotten how to live. He weeps for all of the lost time, all of the broken relationships. He weeps for all of the churches filled with dry bones.

I don't know how many of you saw the movie Because of Winn-Dixie, but it was all I could do not to weep when I saw it. Lazarus is in every scene. Lazarus was the trailer park manager who had grown so bitter all he really cared about was getting a tax write-off for his donations to church. Lazarus was the young girl whose brother had died the previous summer. And since his death, her face had become perpetually frozen so she looked like she was perpetually either sneering or sucking on something sour. Lazarus was Gloria Dump, the blind woman still trying to keep the ghosts at bay for her boozing days. And then there was the church. Lazarus sat in every row of that church. The opening worship scene looked like it was extracted from the horror movie The Day of the Dead; every person in worship just sat there like a zombie showing no signs of life whatsoever. Only the Dewberry boys showed any signs of life and they were fighting on the back row. And who was preaching to the dead? Lazarus. Lazarus, whose wife had left him 7 years previously. And there he was trying to preach good news, trying to proclaim life, trying to breathe spirit on the bones when his own life was so barren, parched and lacking in good news. And into their world marches a smiling dog named Winn-Dixie. Even if you haven't seen the movie you can guess how it ends. Joy comes marching back into their lives and a number of people come back to life and some even come out of their graves. But it's important to note that Winn-Dixie never dragged anybody out of their graves and neither did Christ.

In the Gospel that Jesus commanded the crowd to remove the rock in front of Lazarus' grave, but Jesus did not go in after Lazarus. Jesus may have said with a voice loud enough to wake the dead, "Lazarus come out!" but he never went in after Lazarus. It is up

to Lazarus to come out. Now once we have left our tombs behind, Christ will help unbind us, but it is up to Lazarus to come out and it is up to us to come out as well. Jesus isn't coming in after us.

And here's the other thing; while Jesus tells us to come out, he doesn't make any promises. Jesus doesn't tell Lazarus to come out because he will never hurt again. He doesn't tell Lazarus that his physical body will never die. He doesn't tell Lazarus that his sisters will never die. There are no promises. Jesus simply says, "Lazarus, come out."

The quote I used for the sermon title today is from the object relations therapist and pediatrician D. W. Winnicott: "I hope that when I die I am alive." I don't know about you, but in my line of work I've met a lot of Lazarus'. I've met a long line of people who died a long time before they actually died. I think you know some of them too. They're the ones who live without living; the ones who live only with fear; the ones who'd rather hold a grudge than seek reconciliation; the ones so hurt and wounded by life that they keep life and people at arm's length, even though other people are the only cure for some wounds.

One UCC minister who was a member of the congregation I served was a thorn in my flesh. He was hard to feel sorry for. But he was on a ship in the Pacific during WWII that was hit by a Japanese kamikaze pilot. He saw his mates killed and burned that day and I think he died with them that day. Whenever he preached at someone else's funeral he always talked about that day; about himself; about the day he stopped living.

And then there are those institutions known as churches. Some of them spend a good chunk of their time worrying about not having enough money and obsessed with dwindling membership. Their vision is so finely tuned to the threats, they can no longer see the opportunities. In short, they so fear death, they ironically stop living before they die. Some people like my brother die by active suicide; they make a decision and then they act quickly and impulsively. But many, many others die by passive suicide. These individuals give up on life and then they kill themselves slowly, sometimes very slowly. They give up, they drink, they abuse drugs, they keep people at bay. They are as good as dead, their bodies just need a little time to catch up to their passive-aggressive behavior. Individuals act in that way, but sometimes so too do churches.

So let me ask you; from what side of the tombstone do you live? Will you be alive when you die? How about this church? How many of our decisions are borne out of the fear of dying and how many are borne out of the wonder of living? Would we rather face this post-modern post-churched world from outside of the tomb, or from inside of the tomb of yesterday. How many churches of the Southern Conference are dried bones? How many of them have the winds of God blowing through? How many of them would rather stay with what they know (even though it's dead) than to reappear in a new day and a new world with unknown challenges?

Next week we are going to Jerusalem and there we will discover that Jesus will do whatever it takes to get us to live even if it kills him in the process. And when he dies the week after next he will be 100% alive. How about you? How about us? Jesus is going into a grave so that we could come out of ours. Isn't it about time we came out and faced our fears? Isn't it about time we started living? Amen.