

Where, O Death, Is Thy Victory?  
John 12:1-8

“Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.” (John 12:1)

In one of his sermons James Stewart writes, “There is a lovely old Greek play, the *Alcestis* of Euripides, which tells how the hero Heracles, the Samson of the Greeks, once met and conquered death. There was a day when Heracles on a journey came to the palace of King Admetus; and there he found everyone desolate with grief because Death, that bitter tyrant, had carried off the fair young Queen Alcestis. Whereupon Heracles, who in his day had fought and tamed many wild beasts and dangerous monsters, the lion and the bull, the Hydra and Cerberus, offered to go out to the grave and face this last grim enemy and rob him of his prize. Away out to the lonely tomb he went; and there he met the monster Death, and grappled with him and vanquished him, and set his victim free. And the most beautiful scene in the drama is that in which Heracles comes leading by the hand someone completely covered with a white veil, and stands before the heartbroken King, and cries,

Look on her, if in aught she seems to thee  
Like to thy wife. Step forth from grief to bliss.

And he lifts the veil, and there is Alcestis, alive and fair and smiling as of old. ‘See, O King, I give her back to thee.’ Of course the Greeks knew that it was myth and fable. That kind of thing does not happen in this world. But come across into Christianity, and it is no myth nor fable now. A greater than Heracles is here. Our Master has met the last enemy and triumphed.”

Indeed, John 12:1 says, “Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.” Do you remember the story of how Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, died, and how Jesus raised him from the dead? It’s told in John chapter 11. The story reaches its climax with these words: “Jesus...came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, ‘Take away the stone.’ Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, ‘Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?’ So they took away the stone. And Jesus...cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’” (Jn. 11:38-41a, 43-44)

Yes, one sad day in Bethany, Jesus wrestled with Death and won the victory. And that’s the good news that we need to hear. We need to hear it because our world is full of death. We need to hear it because you and I are dying. We need to hear it because death surrounds us on every hand.

And I’m not just talking about physical death like the physical death of Lazarus. I’m talking about all the little deaths that come to us in life. You know what I mean. Dreams die. Hopes die. Friendships die. Marriages die. Careers die. Courage dies. Love dies. Health fails. Have you ever died just a little? Isn’t it good to know that Jesus can defeat

death? He can defeat all the little deaths we die each day and can give us victory over every little death that comes our way.

Becki Conway died a little when she lost a leg to amputation. An outstanding high school athlete, Becki's friends were amazed at her courage. "Girlfriends on my track team asked, 'How can you have your leg taken away and not be angry?' I responded, 'Well sure, I loved having two legs, but that's not the most important thing to me. If anything, my body often distracted me. Now it's easier to see that what truly matters is my relationship with God, how I'm living and who I'm loving.' Many of my friends knew I was a Christian. They also knew my dad was a pastor, which in itself was sort of a stigma. But I let my friends know that my beliefs were my own and not imposed by my dad...Finally, they listened as I told them about my faith in Jesus Christ and that I was living for something much more lasting than what I was physically. 'My relationship with Christ gives me a higher purpose than just what I could accomplish with my physical body,' I said...I knew God had answered prayers for my healing. He had healed me—emotionally. Incredibly, I never experienced serious depression or anger over my amputation. Incredible to me and unbelievable to everyone else! Only my family and close friends knew I wasn't acting. People from the very first day tried to talk me into anger or tell me I was in denial. People urged me to 'get in touch with my feelings.' I was—and my feelings were fine!"

Yes, death is a part of life. Every day we die a little. Dreams die. Hopes die. Friendships die. Marriages die. Careers die. Courage dies. Love dies. Health fails. Have you ever died a little? Isn't it good to know that Jesus can defeat death? He can defeat all the little deaths we die each day and can give us victory over every little death that comes our way.

And he can defeat that last vast Death—the death that seems so final—physical death when the body finally dies and our life on earth is done. Who here hasn't feared that death? Sarah Winchester did!

"Sarah Winchester's husband had accumulated a vast fortune by manufacturing and selling rifles. After he died...she moved to San Jose, California. (Legend has it that) in her grief, Sarah pursued her interest in spiritism. When she sought out a medium to contact her dead husband, the medium told her, 'As long as you keep building your home, you will never face death.' Sarah believed the spiritist. She purchased (a small home) and started building. The project continued until she died thirty-eight years later at the age of eighty-five. It cost 5 million dollars at a time when workmen earned fifty cents a day. The mansion had grown to 150 rooms, 13 bathrooms, 2,000 doors, 47 fireplaces, and 10,000 windows. It contained stairways that led nowhere and doors that opened into walls. (It is said that) when construction stopped at her death, enough materials remained to have continued building for another eighty years. Today, the Winchester House stands as more than a tourist attraction. It is a silent witness to the dread of death that holds millions of people in bondage." (Author Unknown)

Yes, many people are afraid of death. But we don't have to be. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (Jn. 11:25-26) Well, do you?

If you believe in Jesus then Jesus will deliver you from death. He will deliver you from the despair that comes with life's little deaths and he will deliver you from the grave just as he did for Lazarus. For the Bible says, "Listen to this secret truth: we shall not all die, but when the last trumpet sounds, we shall all be changed in an instant, as quickly as the blinking of an eye. For when the trumpet sounds, the dead will be raised, never to die again, and we shall all be changed. For what is mortal must be changed into what is immortal; what will die must be changed into what cannot die. So when this takes place, and the mortal has been changed into the immortal, then the scriptures will come true: 'Death is destroyed; victory is complete! Where, Death is your victory? Where, Death, is your power to hurt?' Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (I Corinthians 15:51-55, 57)

If you believe that, then death holds no fear. Emmet Harrington believed it. Writing for the University of Portland Magazine, Brian Doyle describes his beloved priest Michael Emmet Harrington. "Emmet's last supper with us was lamb stew, simmered all afternoon with white beans and garlic and tomatoes and oranges, served with spinach salad and fresh-baked bread, accompanied by a red wine from Tuscany. He sang, he told stories. He kept his jacket on during dinner because he was cold, although it was a warm spring evening just after Easter. He removed his fisherman's cap during the meal but put it on again when the dishes were cleared; he was cold, cold. He sang in Gaelic, he sang in English. He sang a song about a mother's love for her children and he sang a song about a whiskey jug. He said grace to open the meal, and blessed my daughter after the meal, placing on her head the same huge hand that had baptized my sons two years before at the very same table...He was very sick then, chilled with the cancer that would soon kill him, with the knowledge of it eating him as he ate the lamb, and he was weak—he had toppled slowly into the ocean of ivy around my house when we arrived, and lay there for a moment like a fallen fir, smiling—but he savored his supper like a starving man, and sipped a little wine in honor of his friend Christ, as he said, and his wit was quick and his memory rich, and when he stood by the door to go, his hand engulfing the knob, he sang a last song, in Gaelic, about calling in the animals at dusk. 'I came in with a song and I'll go with a song,' he said, and he did. His last Mass, at Saint Michael's Church in Portland, was packed—people standing in the aisles, children perched on the shoulders of fathers. By then Emmet could barely walk...He died five weeks later, on a bright afternoon, called in by the Shepherd he loved so, the God he had served so long and so well with those sinewy hands and silver voice, the God he swore was Irish...And three days later he was buried in the coffin he had commissioned, of Oregon juniper from the high desert country, and so was laid to rest Michael Emmet Harrington, priest and storyteller, son of a son of County Cork."

No fear there – just joy and peace in the face of deaths – deaths both big and small – and hope for life eternal. That's the heritage of all them that entrust themselves to Jesus. For Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in him will live. They will live life to the fullest now—triumphing over all life's little deaths. And they will live forever, too, raised from the dust of death to life everlasting. Do you believe it? If so, then like Mary and Martha in the gospel lesson for today, you'll serve this Christ, as Martha did, and give your all, as Mary did, to him who defeated death and brought you the gift of life abundant and eternal. Amen.<sup>i</sup>

---

<sup>i</sup> This sermon was written with no intention of publication and hence there are no references to the original sources of the stories and illustrations included in it. Those sources are now lost to this author. Apologies to all.