

And Death Shall Have No Dominion

Preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on May 1, 2022

Friendship Presbyterian Church

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day."
(John 6:35-40, NRSV)

I know it may sound funny to say, but some of the more amusing things you can run across when you do family history research are *gravestone* inscriptions. As most of you know, I am an avid family historian, and over the last 30 years, every now and then, I've found one that is just priceless.

On one occasion, it was the grave of a couple – some 19th century ancestors of mine, of Scottish heritage – in a rural Methodist Church cemetery in the panhandle of Florida ... The Mount Ida Methodist Church cemetery. The stone itself is typical of others there, but the message on it stands out. It's simple, but memorable (and to me anyway, kind of hilarious).

Below the names and ages and dates of death is this little, stand-alone inscription on this stone in this rural Methodist Church cemetery: "They were members of the Presbyterian Church."

I just love this. Makes me proud to be one too! Whether this message was *their* idea (knowing they might – horrors of horrors! – be buried in a Methodist Church cemetery) or something that the Methodists themselves felt compelled to add is unknown. Either way, gravestone research *can* be fun at times.

But at other times, it can be a sobering reminder. There are few things quite so poignant as an old gravestone in a country churchyard, with an inscription so worn down by the elements that you can't read it anymore. What once was a testimony – in stone – to a human life once as alive and real as you and I are now, is now lost to us, and forgotten, gone for all time.

Today is the 3rd Sunday of the Easter season. This is a season in which we explore the power and significance of Easter faith for our lives today. What does faith in the Resurrection on this side of the veil mean for the sort of people we will be? For the kind of church we will be?

I think our common experience of the worn-down gravestone can help us with these questions and give us some insight into the real meaning of what we say we believe. And it can do this precisely because it can give us a real insight into *Death*, and the *power* of Death.

We can talk about Death as the conclusion of a particular life ... the proverbial “return to dust.” Sometimes, it’s tragic and apparently meaningless. Other times, it seems less ominous – more like relief or the fitting end to a story. But either way, in concert with its partner Time, Death has an ominous power that is undeniable – a power that may be the most terrifying of all: The power to wipe away all memory of us ... ultimately, as on a worn-down stone, to *erase* us.

And our Easter faith notwithstanding, the New Testament view of Death, too, is soberingly realistic. Death is understood as more than just the cessation of life, but as *dissolution* ...as a *force* which consigns all that we know, all that we love, all that is good and beautiful, to *oblivion*, beyond the reach of time and memory.

But it’s understood to do even more still. Death claims a *dominion* over us ... over all that is, and ever was, and ever will be ... having a malevolent will of its *own*, enlisting the *living* into its service. For the New Testament, Death is an *enemy*, active in the midst of life – an enemy which is the very *negation* of life ... not content merely to kill, but to destroy.

We know that Death, in this full biblical sense, is all too real. It’s hard to even say such words or think such thoughts, without fighting back tears or speaking through the lump in our throats. It’s hard to get past it.

But our faith, which is able to tell the truth about Death without backing away or softening the blow, also points to something *more*. Death *is* all too real, but this isn’t all there is. Death is not the end of the story. It doesn’t have the final word.

The Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, who wrote as evocatively as anyone ever has on this bold affirmation of our Easter faith, declared, echoing words of the Apostle Paul, that “Death shall have no dominion”:

*And death shall have no dominion.
Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.*

This poem comes back to me whenever I think of those I have loved – and lost. As does a simple and moving piece of music – a portion of which we have just heard from the men’s ensemble. It’s one of the most beautiful hymns of the Christian Church — “Nearer, My God, To Thee”:

*Nearer, my God, to thee, nearer to thee;
E'en though it be a cross that raiseth me,
still all my song shall be,
nearer, my God, to thee.*

*There let the way appear, steps up to heaven;
all that thou sendest me, in mercy given;
angels to beckon me,
nearer, my God, to thee.*

*Or if, on joyful wing, cleaving the sky,
sun, moon, and stars forgot, upward I fly,
still all my song shall be,
nearer, my God, to thee.*

Written by Sarah Flower Adams, the poetry of the *full* text is a prayer based on the account in Genesis 28 of Jacob's night vision of a ladder reaching all the way to heaven, and God himself standing there, sharing his words of blessing, assurance, and promise. And Jacob awakens from his sleep and exclaims, "Surely the *Lord* is in this place, and I did not know it!" It is for Jacob a much-needed divine reminder that God would keep him and never leave him, never abandon him, no matter what.

Many of you may remember the role that this hymn plays in the Oscar-winning film *Titanic*, as the grand ship is rapidly sinking, and the string ensemble seems to conclude. And as they begin to disband to seek spaces on rapidly-filling lifeboats, the ensemble's leader pauses and begins to play one final song – this hymn – and the others look around, with cries of terror and fear all about them, and without hesitation, they join him. It's the last music they will ever play. This scene is one of the most powerful and poignant in the history of film, and perhaps best of all, it seems to be based in fact.

These musicians could only have done this if they *knew* something, deep down, that many of us struggle with. They knew all too well that Death is real, as the icy waves rose, as their sounds would soon be engulfed and silenced. In their sharing of that sacred song on that tragic night, as mortality closed around them, they were *witnesses* to something –

That even in the face of the watery deep, even in the face of certain death, there is something still greater and stronger than Death ...

That by the *Grace* of God and the *Love* of God, Death – for all its undeniable power – does *not* have the final word, does *not* have the final claim on us ...

And that, in the end, we belong to *God*, and that Death shall have *no* dominion.

Yes, Death *is* real. We know it. But the musicians on the Titanic knew it too. And Jacob knew it. And the disciples of Jesus, especially having lived through that one Friday afternoon, knew it. But it's not *all* they knew.

They all saw, experienced, and lived something *more* too, something that gave them hope, and *more* than hope ... a Life and a Love in the midst of this life, which even Death cannot stop.

This is what we mean when we say that Jacob saw with his own eyes the One who would keep him and never leave him, never abandon him, *no matter what*.

This is what we mean when we say that the disciples – that one Sunday morning, and in the locked room, and on the seashore – saw with their own eyes the one whom Death had tried and failed to take from them, and that because he lives, they would too.

And this is what the Apostle Paul meant when he said that he could face suffering and the threat of death with confidence and assurance, “For I know the one in whom I have put my trust” (II Timothy 1:12).

And now here we are this morning, preparing to gather at the Lord's Table, and experience again that provision that Death cannot stop. Jesus tells us, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty ... and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away.”

Do we still sometimes doubt? Of course, we do. Death is real. But here's what I also know: *God* is real, and *God* is *Love*. And as it is now, so it will ever be. In the midst of this world, and even in the midst of death, we are held in a fellowship that sustains us. We are embraced in a Love and Grace which will never let us go and can never die, and so, Death shall have no dominion – to the Glory of God! Amen.