



SUNNYVALE

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From the Pulpit

Sermon ~ *When 4 Days Is a Lifetime*
The Rev. Dr. Steve Harrington ~ May 1, 2011

Isaiah 25:6-9

John 11 (selected verses)

When I was 24, soon to be 25, I became the solo pastor of the Glenwood Presbyterian Church in Florida. One of the things that drew me to the church and helped confirm my sense of call there was that it was the only church in Glenwood. That appealed to me since, like everything else in America, we have an excess of churches while other places in the world never hear the gospel at all. One-church-for-one-community seemed like a good stewardship of resources to me.

So there I was fresh out of seminary, the new *young* minister of the Presbyterian Church; *but also* pastor to the whole community, right? 'cause we were the only church in town – *literally*. And, as it turned out, I started in this latter role – this *larger* job description of community pastor – before I even began as the minister of the congregation. 2 days after moving to Florida and a week or so before I was scheduled to actually start my job at the church I was notified that a woman in the community – Mrs. Little – had died.

A couple of members from the church stopped by the Parsonage, the house next to the church where we had just taken up residence and were still unpacking boxes. They told me about Mrs. Little's death that morning and wanted me to come right then and visit her bereaved husband. So I went. As they drove me down a sandy side street to the little cinderblock house where Mr. Little lived they told me 2 things about him: 1. that he never comes to church and 2. he is very hard of hearing. And let me just say, he never *did* come to church and, as I continued to see him around town, his hearing only got worse!

Anyway, on the way over, riding with these members I had just met, I was trying to look all collected and competent and, you know: *pastoral* (whatever that looks like when you're 24!)... but to tell you the truth I had no experience *at all* with death and dying and bereavement and I was thinking, "What am I *doing* here?" And more specifically, "What am I supposed to *do* here?" They didn't really teach us any of that in seminary.

So, we went into the house and they introduced me as the new pastor of the church which didn't seem to impress Mr. Little at all. He was just sitting there in his lounge chair and so I sat across from him on the couch and spoke to him in what I thought would be a concerned and comforting pastoral voice. I said, "I'm sorry to hear about your wife." He said, "What?" I said a little louder, "I'm sorry to hear about your wife." He said, "*What?*" I looked around at the others in the room, smiled and nodded my head like I had this all under control and had experienced

many such challenges in all my *ZERO* days of ministry; I inched a little closer on the couch and yelled out, "I'm sorry to hear about your wife." He said, "*WHAT?*"

That was my first pastoral call to the bereaved and grieving. And it didn't get much better with Mr. Little as the visit continued. I read some Scripture and prayed for him and later that month we buried his wife out in the country cemetery outside of town at the end of a dead-end road.

Since then I've made a lot more bereavement visits – well over 1000 I guess. I've sat with a lot of *you* as we cried and prayed and tried to make sense of the loss that had broken in on your life. I'm not sure I've gotten any better at knowing what to say but I think I have become more comfortable in not saying anything.

And now these many years later as I reflect back on my visit with Mr. Little it occurs to me that the problem wasn't just with his hearing *or* with my uncertain voice. The problem was also with my words – with my empty “ministerial” expressions of sympathy and my clueless understanding of grief. I just kept saying the same thing over and over with no greater effect for all my increasing volume. I think I understand a little better now that we need something different in the shadowed place of grief, something different in the cold dark despair of loss – something different than platitudes and polite words and predictable sayings: we need silence; we need hope: we need resurrection!

I like this passage in John 11 a lot because Jesus enters into the depth and despair of the sisters' grief *even though* he knows he will soon raise Lazarus from the dead. He does not pass quickly over their sorrow just because he's about to call Lazarus from the tomb. He does not skip lightly from Palm Sunday directly to Easter without passing through the dark valley of the shadow of death that was the cross. Death is too grim a reality to pretend it is not the painful bane of our lives.

We gather here on this resurrection and remembrance Sunday to affirm the hope that we have because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ *but...* that doesn't mean we minimize the pain we feel or the grief we bear or the sorrow we endure. The truth is, even those of us with strong faith and a firm grip on the hope of the resurrection still go through a journey of grief that is hard.

I have a few slides to show you that I think capture some of that progression we go through as we come to grips with both the reality of death but also the victory of the resurrection. Not everyone makes it all the way through this progression – some get stuck in the place of grief or the dead-end of despair.

The loss we experience at the death of a loved one always begins as a crippling sorrow that buckles (1st slide) our knees and bows our heads in grief. Life is stopped short and joy seems to hit a (2nd slide) dead-end like that road that led to our country Cemetery back in Glenwood. And we still feel that today because we are still in the between times – still caught in the sorrow of death and have not yet entered into the full celebration of life.

And yet, as people of faith, we try to be like this Angel I saw sitting on a tombstone (3d slide) in a cemetery up in the Berkeley hills where I did a graveside service a few months ago. While a lot of the angel statues in cemeteries are doubled over in grief and laying on top of the tombs in a posture of mourning, I was intrigued with this one Angel, whimsically waiting for the resurrection – understanding that in Christ hope has begun but it is not yet fully known; that in Christ death has been dealt a fatal blow but it is not fully defeated.

Last summer as Nancy and I were driving up north to backpack the Lost Coast Trail we drove through Briceland, California that has a cemetery with a very interesting name on it that reflects quite a different theology than those who would see death as a dead-end. The name of the

cemetery was (4th slide) "Beginnings"! What Jesus proclaims and his resurrection proves Lazarus' experience affirms: that the grave is not the end of life but the beginning of new life lived in the healing presence of God.

And then just last week a pastor friend of mine sent me an e-mail telling me about his mother's recent funeral. She had worked all her life serving God in the ministry of the Salvation Army. She had been promoted many times up through the ranks to become an officer in her division. As is their custom in the Salvation Army the funeral pall that was laid over her casket at the gravesite proclaimed her faith: (5th slide) "promoted to glory".

The Bible tells us that from the time that Lazarus died to the time Jesus brought him back from the dead was four days. Four days. In those four days Martha and Mary experienced a depth of grief and a frustration at God and anger at Jesus and a sense of loss in their lives that pierced their souls, crushed their hearts and tried their faith. Four days. We all live in the same hard four days when we experience the grief of loss and the frustration of unanswered prayer and the challenge of faith.

We see this frustration in both sisters as they confront Jesus when he finally *does* arrive and they say, "Lord, *if* you had *been* here, my brother would not have died." Such exquisite honesty. If. If only. If only things were different. If only the tests had come back negative. If only the doctors had found it sooner. If only the accident had not occurred. If only we had had a few more years together -- if only God had been there and done what we wanted... How many of us and how many times have we felt stuck upon the sharp point of "if only" in our lives wishing God had done *what* we asked *when* we asked it?

When Jesus goes to the tomb with Mary and Martha and tells them to roll back the stone of the grave he challenges them to trust beyond what their experience tells them. Martha, the practical one, points out the obvious: "Lord he has been in there four days now and the stench will be great." I've always liked the frankness of the King James translation here: In that version Martha says, "Lord, he stinkith!" But Jesus says, trust me. And so against common sense and their better judgment they roll back the stone and let Jesus in. And the result is a miracle: out of death, life.

Friends in the place that stinks and where life seems lost Jesus stands *with us* - and two things are true there: first, he weeps with us; which is to say that God is not unaware of the grief and the pain that has come upon us. In Jesus Christ God stands outside the places where death and sin have done their worst and he weeps with us in our pain.

But second, Jesus also calls new life out of that dark and stinking place. And Lazarus comes out! It is the proof of what he said: Jesus is the resurrection and the life. And what happened that day in Bethany was just a foretaste of the empty tomb that we celebrated on Easter which is just a foretaste of the promise we hold in faith for our loved ones: eternal life in the presence of God.

This is our confidence: that in the place that stinks, the fragrance of life returns; in the place of tears, an outbreak of joy; in the place of fear, faith takes a risk... all because of Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life, believe in me!" The truth is everything is *not* as it should be, but neither is it as it *will* be. Death does not have the last word. At the communion supper today we rehearse and remember the death of Jesus, but we also celebrate that in his death, death has died.

In Eugene O'Neill's play, *Lazarus Laughed*, a man who saw Lazarus come forth from his grave is telling the story to others. He says Lazarus stepped out of the grave and, looking at Jesus, began "to laugh softly like a man in love with God! Such a laugh I never heard!" he says. "It made my ears drunk! It was like wine! And though I was half dead with fright I found myself laughing, too!"

Some people then ask Lazarus, "What is beyond the grave? Lazarus answers, "There is only life! I heard the heart of Jesus laughing in my heart... and I laughed in the laughter of God. So laugh! Laugh with me! Death is dead! Fear is no more! There's only life! There is only laughter!"

In the space of these 4 days that we call life on this earth there are tears of grief and frustrations of faith but in the end, Day four comes and on that day death dies, fear is no more and there is only life -- there is only laughter. Alleluia, amen.