

Proper 5C07

You may know the story of a young minister who was asked by a funeral director to hold a graveside service for a homeless man who had died while traveling through the area. The service was to be held at a new cemetery way back in the country. This man would be the first person laid to rest there.

As he was not familiar with the back woods area, the young minister soon became quite lost and finally arrived over an hour late. He saw the backhoe by the grave and noticed that the crew was eating lunch under a nearby tree, but the hearse was nowhere in sight. He apologized to the workers for his tardiness, and stepped to the side of the open grave, where he saw the vault lid already in place. The young preacher assured the vault crew he would not hold them long, but this was the proper thing to do. The workers gathered around still eating their lunch. The young preacher poured out his heart and soul.

As he preached the workers began to say "Amen," "Praise the Lord," and "Glory hallelujah." The young preacher preached and preached like he'd never preached before, from Genesis all the way through Revelation. He closed the lengthy service at last with a prayer and began to walk toward the car. He felt he had done his duty for the homeless man, and that the crew would leave with a renewed sense of purpose and dedication, in spite of his tardiness.

As he was opening the door and taking off his coat, the minister overheard one of the workers saying to another, “I ain’t never seen anything like that before . . . and I been putting in septic tanks for over twenty years.”

We laugh about the things that make us uncomfortable. Sometimes to help avoid dealing with those things. But the scriptures have a way of holding up life situations that make it impossible for us to avoid facing them. And this morning is one of those times.

Both our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures and from the Gospel according to Luke for today are about death. And death, of course, is one of those subjects we don’t like to discuss—unless we can laugh about it. But if you think about it, given what we are about as a community of faith, death ought to be one of those subjects that we are all well-versed in. Because the scriptures, and what our faith says about the scriptures, says a lot about death.

In the story we heard this morning from I Kings, the prophet Elijah is lodging in the home of a widow. This widow has been very kind to Elijah. Tragically her only son becomes ill and dies. And the poor widow strikes out at Elijah, as if somehow this was his fault.

This is not unusual. As someone once said, “hurting people hurt people!” And this woman was hurting, and so she lashed out at Elijah because she had nobody else to lash out at. Elijah, of course, had no desire to strike back.

This woman had befriended him. Now it was his turn to help her. "Give me your son," Elijah replies. He takes the boy, carries him to his bedroom, and lays him on the bed. Then Elijah cries out to God, "O Lord my God, let this boy's life return to him!" And the writer of I Kings tells us, "The Lord heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him. Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room. He gave him to his mother and said, 'Look, your son is alive!'"

Then there is Luke's story. Jesus and his disciples are visiting a town called Nain. As they approach the town gate, a body is being carried out—the body of a widow's only son. Jesus did not know this woman but when he saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" And miraculously this young man who was dead sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. Luke tells us that the people who observed this "were filled with awe and praised God."

Well, no surprise there. Who wouldn't if they witnessed an event like that. These life after death miracle stories from scripture were always hard for me to swallow, until a professor pointed out to me the possibility that, as a literary work, perhaps the authors might have been foreshadowing what they believed the future held. Especially in the case of Luke—the resurrection. However YOU feel about these miracle stories, they do move us to at least try to deal with the tragedy of death—a very real human experience.

We have two elements in these stories that speak of the pain of loss around death. First, both of the women in these stories are widows. They had lost their husbands. For some people, life comes to a grinding halt with the death of a spouse. Frances Jerz, sixty-five, lost her husband. She told columnist Roger Simon of the Chicago Sun-Times that even after three years, she still cried. Mr. Jerz had been a machine operator and was approaching retirement when he succumbed to cancer. How did Mrs. Jerz deal with her husband's passing? Well, every Sunday she got dressed up like her husband was there in the house with her. Her daughter drove her to the cemetery. Then she went and sat by her husband's tombstone. She said this made her feel like he was close to her again.

Everyone deals with death in their own way. We don't know how these women in our scripture readings dealt with losing their husbands. But when we encounter them, life seems unbelievably cruel. They are faced not only with the loss of their husbands, but also with losing their only child. Facing one of these life events is daunting. To experience both would be more than many of us could bear.

Many of you are familiar with Eric Clapton, the Grammy Award winning English guitarist, singer and composer. Clapton is one of the most influential musicians of the rock era. On a warm spring day in March of 1991 Eric Clapton received a phone call from his wife, Lori. In a frantic voice she told him that their four and a half year old son, Connor, had just accidentally fallen to his death after crawling out of an open window of their 53rd floor Manhattan apartment.

Clapton could not believe what he was hearing and rushed the ten blocks to his apartment to find paramedic equipment everywhere, ambulances, and police cars. Only then did he begin to realize with a sinking heart that it was true.

Months later he said in Rolling Stone magazine, "After it sunk in that my son had died . . . it's funny, but I really didn't feel anything; I went blank. I just turned to stone and wanted to go away. I mean there was no way I could have ever prepared for what had happened. But in time I found that I couldn't avoid feeling the pain of Connor's death. I had to go through the suffering."

Out of his suffering, Clapton turned to his music and wrote a very personal song to express his grief . . . his struggle to live with the loss of his son . . . his yearning to know peace in his life again. You may remember the song. It is called, "Tears in Heaven," and its lyrics speak of Clapton's search for the healing of his shattered heart:

"Would you know my name if I saw you in heaven?
Would you hold my hand, if I saw you in heaven?
I must be strong to carry on, 'cause I know I don't belong here in heaven."
The last words of the song are these:
"Beyond the door, there's peace for sure, and I know, there'll be no more tears in heaven."

The two stories we heard from scripture today remind us of the tragedy of death. But they also tell us of God's love. And that is where our faith comes in to speak to us about this very human experience of death.

These stories ARE miracle stories. But our emphasis should not be on the miracles, rather on the truth behind the miracles: That truth is that God sees and cares for us in our grief.

I met a pediatric oncologist during my work as a Chaplain at Packard Children's Hospital. This physician was agnostic. That was before Anna died. Anna was a little girl who had leukemia. As death came close, her parents, the hospital chaplain, and this doctor gathered at her bedside. "Before she died," the doctor wrote, "Anna mustered the final energy to sit up in her hospital bed and say, 'The angels-- they're so beautiful, Mommy, can you see them? Do you hear them singing? They're so beautiful, Mommy.' And then she lay back on her pillow and died."

The chaplain, who was uncomfortable with all this, left quickly, leaving the agnostic doctor to help these grieving Christian parents. What she remembered was that Anna's parents were deeply comforted by what had happened, "as if they had been given the most precious gift in the world . . . Together we contemplated a spiritual mystery," said the doctor, "that transcended our understanding and experience." That doctor experienced the power of God's love when it touches us at pivotal moments in our lives—like the death of a loved one.

I believe with all my heart that in both life and death we are surrounded by God's love. Some of us have experienced that love. Perhaps it was in the midst of a time of loss. A time when your faith in God was not feeling so strong.

But there's one thing more to be said: there comes a time when we must return to life. There is a time for grieving--and it is an important time. But there is also a time for returning to life. Because it is life that is God's gift to us. And it is in living our lives to the fullest that we can best honor the memories of those we have loved.

It was once a custom in Russian villages, at a time when many children did not survive infancy, to have a mourning hut at the outskirts of every town. All women who lost children were sent to live in that hut for a month of solitude and grief. At the end of the month, the hut was set on fire. The woman inside had to decide whether to live or die. If she came out of the burning hut, she was prepared to live, and she then rebuilt the hut for the next mourner. As harsh as the practice may sound to us, it provided a graphic picture of the necessity we confront to decide to move out of the despair we find ourselves in when we are dealing with grief.

That's what those who have gone on must want for us who are left behind. They must want us to pick up our lives and move on with the conviction that the God who loves us also loves them. God is not the God of the dead, Jesus once noted, but of the living. That means that those we love are still living with God. If we believe that, we have no choice. We must move on toward God-filled living again.

We may not be ready to do cartwheels when someone dies, but ultimately that is the will of God. That we should arise, and live out the life we have been gifted with.

So, in the end, what are we left with when we think about death? Probably not sappy words of how we should be so happy because those we have loved are now with God. Somehow that doesn't cut the mustard. But instead, a very real, honest recognition that because it means separation, death hurts. Death is not something to look forward to. But, and this is a big but, knowing that God is with us in that time . . . knowing that through our prayers and through the people God surrounds us with his love. . . knowing that God cares deeply for us somehow helps in putting death in its proper perspective . . . as a part of life. And in so doing, we add to the richness of this wonderful, precious life that God has given us. A life in which God is always creating something new.

Amen.