

Preacher: Tim Hollenberg-Duffey

Scripture: John 19:41-20:2; 20:11-16a, 20

A priest and pastor from the local parishes are standing by the side of the road holding up a sign that reads, "The End is Near! Turn yourself around now before it's too late!" They planned to hold up the sign to each passing car.

The first driver yelled at the two religious leaders as he sped by, "Leave us alone, you religious nuts!" From around the curve, they heard screeching tires and a big splash.

One clergy said to the other, "Do you think instead we should just put up a sign that says, 'Bridge Out'?"¹

We've got ourselves so preoccupied with endings like the grandiose end of the world, that we don't always see what's right in front of us. Endings are simply part of our story, part of the human experience; and so, we ought to face them head on and not like popular movie culture which is filling the theaters with apocalyptic tales of terror and destruction.

Things end. We do experience the power of death in our lives, but why does it need to own us and preoccupy us. On Monday, I went to a Continuing Education Event on ministry with people living with Alzheimer's and dementia and their families. What a phenomenal experience as our teacher walked us through ways to give dignity to people even as their cognition and memory changes day by day. Our trainer, the Director of Memory Care at Cross Keys Village in New Oxford, PA (a CoB retirement home), encouraged us to speak to these real issues that people face as they lose abilities that they once found easy. She said that for care givers, walking with someone through these times is like experiencing little deaths along the way; and we must face each of these little deaths with courage.

Our daughter Anita's middle name, Claire, comes from my grandmother on my mom's side. My Grandma Claire died more than ten years ago after having lived with progressing Alzheimer's for 12 years. I was a young boy when she received that diagnosis, but I remember Mom coping with every significant change in Grandma's life, every little end—stopping driving, wandering off, moving to long-term care, forgetting who we were. It's a terrible disease. But people who learn to deal well with it face every little end, every little death along the way, head on. We do not ignore those ends, but we love people through them. For that is all ours to do.

All of you who have been through this terrible disease with a loved one or who have simply lost a loved one, you know the pain that comes with any such end. You probably are also familiar with the stages of grief from the brilliant mind of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. It takes time for us to work to a place of acceptance during any ending and before we arrive there, we will go through difficult places along the way—anger, depression. That's part of what it means to be human.

The scripture I've chosen from the Gospel of John comes at the end of John's story about the life of Jesus. The first bit of scripture is about death. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea take the body of Jesus to a nearby garden and lay him in a new tomb. In the throes of grief, Nicodemus and Joseph do this. They are human, too. They probably felt like they were facing another end, another death in the only way they knew how. They honored their beloved friend with a new tomb in a beautiful garden with expensive spices for the burial.

Death. We are terrified of this aren't we? Death. The great end. I wonder if it was because of fear that only Nicodemus and Joseph bury Jesus' body. Where was everybody else? The stage of denial? How many of us live with a paralyzing fear of death?

¹<http://jokes.cc.com/funny-god/flconi/the-end-is-near>

Pastor Twyla Rowe is the Chaplain down at Fahrney Keedy Home and Village. Twyla wrote an article for the most recent *Messenger Magazine* titled “Coming to Live.” She says that people often wonder how the chaplain of a nursing home spends most of her time. They assume she does a lot of funerals because as we all know nursing homes are where people go and wait to die. She has spoken that phrase to me personally with a smirk on her face. Twyla tells us that this is a false illusion. It’s a stigma that comes from our societal fear of aging and dying, and it’s a stigma that needs to die. Because we are afraid of death, we have a hard time seeing the truth that Pastor Twyla points out to us that older adults go there to live. Yes, she’ll spend time doing some end of life spiritual care, but she also is always helping people grow deeper in faith through Bible study, worship, ritual, visitation, and spiritual programming that pushes our seasoned citizens closer to Christ. That’s her reality as a chaplain at Fahrney Keedy—she ministers to fullness of life, not death.²

Poet Mary Oliver once wrote, “Listen, are you breathing just a little and calling it a life?”³ Are you so paralyzed by the reality that things come to an end that you forget to keep living, keep loving, keep caring. “Are you breathing just little and calling it a life?” Do not be spiritual dead before your physical body gives way.

Oliver’s thought-provoking question had me asking which has more power over my life—death or life? For if I allow death to have power, sulking out there in some unknown end, then I live in a fog without a care beyond my own lost self. But rather, we are people of life. We live not with death looming but with life blossoming around us always, which is interesting to me when Joseph and Nicodemus place Jesus to die in a beautiful garden, a tomb surrounded by blossoming life. Nicodemus should also serve as a symbol of life in John’s Gospel because it is to Nicodemus that Jesus explains that people must be born again to new life. While being constantly reminded of life, it appears that the disciples still assume Jesus is dead. Death is final, the ultimate end—it’s what we all dread and fear.

So, do you know where this is headed yet? You people of the New Testament Gospel of Jesus Christ ought to know. The story of Jesus’ death ends in John chapter 19, but the story goes on. There was nothing final about Jesus’ death at all. Guess what has always been a lie? That death is something final. God doesn’t do such ultimate endings. In chapter 20, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb early the next morning while it is still dark, and she discovers that the tomb is empty. Now Mary is still in the cloudy illusion that death is final, so her assumption is that somebody has taken Jesus’ body. She goes to tell the disciples. Peter and the disciple Jesus loved ran to the tomb to see for themselves. They discover things as Mary said—the burial cloth lying there. The text says, “He saw and believed.” Believed what? I think the author is not saying that the disciples have yet believed in Jesus’ resurrection, but rather that they believed Mary and agreed with her that someone had taken the body. The two disciples are likewise living in the same fog that death is permanent. The next verse John 20:9 says, “For as yet, they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead.” So, they go home, still in the throes of grief.

At this point, Mary is crying when Christ finally appears to her. And to her he is the gardener until he speaks her name, “Mary,” and finally she sees the Lord. The fog of death looms no more. Likewise, when he appears to the disciples and reveals his wounds, the fog of death is lifted. The fog of death is so thick and its power to paralyze us from seeing things as

² Rowe, Twyla. “Coming to Live.” *Messenger Magazine*. May 2019.

³ Oliver, Mary. “Have you ever tried to enter the long black branches.” *West Wind*. Retrieved from <http://files.kristinsworld.com/Supremes/Poem.htm>

they really are is so strong, that Jesus must physically stand in our presence before we understand and believe that death is no end at all. Death is not an end. Jesus has gone through death, straight to the other side of death to strip it of its power over us.

People of faith just found a whole new norm! We are people of resurrection and of life! We are people who do not anxiously attempt to ignore the power of death looming in the corner, but rather face it dead on with the power of life. We are people whose story is not defined by some end but keeps getting written into eternity.

What would it look like in your life today, if you stopped letting death loom and rather embraced resurrection, born again, new life? Would you turn off that depressive news to call a friend who needs to hear a cheerful voice? Would you look at an inevitable transition in your life as a new opportunity to share the love of Jesus instead of some dreaded doom? Would you choose to embrace more family time so that your dearest ones might pass on to their families the importance of sharing time? Would you invite yourself to turn off worldly productivity for a moment to simply enjoy scripture, or quiet prayer, or a walk into creation. What would it look like for you to stop giving power to death in your life?

There's an old saying that there are only two certainties in life: death and taxes. But what if I told you that there was only one certainty in life: the love of Jesus. Death is no longer a certainty. Yes, we will all die, but there is nothing final about it. The only final thing is that Jesus has always loved us and wanted fullness of life for us. So, embrace it and let the fog lift. It doesn't matter if you're 2 or 82. It doesn't matter if you're healthy or well, rich or poor. The invitation is there to face death and those little deaths along the way, square in the eye, and embrace it with life and the love of Jesus.

I want to close with a fictional tale from Peter Rollins. "In the center of a once-great city there stood a magnificent cathedral that was cared for by a kindly old priest who spent his days praying in the vestry and caring for the poor. As a result of the priest's tireless work, the cathedral was known throughout the land as a true sanctuary. The priest welcomed all who came to his door and gave completely without prejudice or restraint..."

"Early one evening in the middle of winter, while the priest was praying before the cross, there was a loud and ominous knock on the cathedral door. The priest quickly got to his feet and went to the entrance, as he knew it was a terrible night and reasoned that his visitor might need shelter.

"Upon opening the door, he was surprised to find a terrifying demon towering over him with large eyes and rotting flesh. 'Old man,' the demon hissed, 'I have traveled many miles to seek your shelter. Will you welcome me in?'

"Without hesitation, the priest bid this hideous demon welcome and beckoned him into the church. The evil demon stooped down and stepped across the threshold, spitting venom onto the tile floor as he went. In full view of the priest, the demon proceeded to tear down the various icons that adorned the walls and rip the fine linens that hung around the sanctuary, while screaming blasphemy and curses. During this time, the priest knelt silently on the floor and continued in his devotions until it was time to retire for the night.

"'Old man,' cried the demon, 'where are you going now?'

"'I am returning home to rest for it has been a long day,' replied the kindly priest.

"'May I come with you?' spat the demon. 'I too am tired and in need of a place to lay my head.'

"'Why of course,' said the priest. 'Come and I will prepare a meal.'

“On returning to his house, the priest prepared some food while the evil demon mocked the priest and broke the various religious artifacts that adorned the humble dwelling. The demon then ate the meal that was provided and afterward turned his attention to the priest, ‘Old man, you welcomed me first into your church and then into your house. I have one more request for you: will you now welcome me into your heart?’

“‘Why of course,’ said the priest, ‘what I have is yours and what I am is yours.’

“This heartfelt response brought the demon to a standstill, for by giving everything, the priest had retained the very thing the demon sought to take. For the demon was unable to rob him of his kindness and his hospitality, his love and his compassion. And so, the great demon left in defeat never to return. ... [Then the priest] simply ascended his stairs, got into bed and drifted off to sleep, all the time wondering what guise his Christ would take next.”⁴

It’s a story of staring death in the face and choosing the power of life. Isn’t this exactly what Jesus did and does? He faced death squarely and was crucified and chose to put an end to the power of death by rising again to new life. Do not let death rob you of life. Do not let death rob you of your compassion, your faith, your hope that in every end is beginning and every death, newness of life. Jesus’ resurrection means a new day, a new world—the old powers mean nothing for new life has come.

⁴ Rollins, Peter. *The Orthodox Heretic*. Paraclete Press, 2009. pp 24-27.