

Easter 3 – 14 April 2024 - St. James Cathedral

Acts 3.12-19; Ps 4; 1 John 3.1-7; Lk 24: 36b-48

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In the name of God, who is creating Source, Redeeming Word, and Life-giving Spirit. Amen

“Christ has risen from the dead trampling down death by death. And to those in the tomb restoring life.”

An ancient hymn from the Easter vigil. During that same liturgy, perhaps some of you know that the Exultet prayer at the lighting of the paschal candle includes the following statement, *“This is the night when Jesus Christ broke the chains of evil and death and rose victorious from the grave.”*

These words summarize the Christian understanding of Easter. Our liturgies proclaim such words boldly. They go to the heart of our faith in the resurrection. Christ has conquered death, and so we human creatures need not fear death. As we read in chapter 15 of first Corinthians, “Where oh death, is your victory; Where Oh death is your sting?”

These words sound wonderfully reassuring, don’t it? And yet....

And yet - how deeply do such words penetrate into our hearts and minds? How much do we actually believe them – or even if we believe the words, how much do we actually feel like these words are true - particularly when we begin to feel the aging process start to wear on our vulnerable human bodies, or when we lose a loved one whose time on earth has come to an end?

Our worship liturgies, and the writings of sacred scripture, reassure us that we need not fear death. But our culture tells us a different story, doesn’t it. We are often encouraged not only to fear death, but to resist it with every fibre of our being. Despite being reminded on Ash Wednesday to remember that we are dust, and that to dust we shall return, in a culture that worships young bodies, that part of us which fears the mystery of death is encouraged to hold on to the fantasy of immortality.

To help us think about this, I’d like to turn to a strange story that I think serves as a parable for how our culture often reacts to the idea of death. The novel *Zero K* by the American writer Don DeLillo portrays the extent to which some seek to avoid the reality of death. The book describes an attitude to death and resurrection that’s in sharp contrast to the Easter story. *Zero K* is the story of a billionaire, who decides to try to avoid dying by undertaking a new experimental procedure. It involves the freezing of his body – a technology called “cryogenic suspension.” The idea, sold to him by a company called The Convergence, is that, in the future, new technology will be found that will allow his body to be defrosted and his consciousness and memories fully restored. In other words, he is offered the promise of escaping death.

The Convergence promotes this death-defying dream with slogans like, “Die a while, then live forever!” The narrator of the story, who is the son of the man seeking to escape death, compares the process his father seeks to a “long slow sabbatical in a capsule.” When the son sits with his father as he is prepared for freezing, the father says, “We are born without choosing to be. Should we have to die in the same manner?”

This defiant attitude towards death implies that we human beings can and should be in control of everything that ever happens to us. This desperate attempt to escape from death – to freeze one’s biological clock so that one need not experience the effects of time – is a very different attitude towards mortality than we encounter in today’s readings from scripture. In Psalm 4 we hear, “I lie down in peace ... for only you, Lord, make me dwell in safety.” Our security from the effects of death and aging, in other words, is found only through our belonging to and dwelling in God. According to this psalm, we aren’t in control – but that’s OK because God is.

On the difficulty we humans have of accepting this understanding, the Welsh theologian Rowan Williams writes, “Human beings are perennially vulnerable to the temptation of arrogating divinity to themselves.” We often refuse to accept our finitude, our dependence on others, our frailty. But such refusals mean we must deny that we are but human beings, and seek instead to be like God.

When it comes to thinking about death and dying, how often do you find yourself praying like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane – “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me,” as if to ask – ‘please God, don’t let me become old and die’. I must confess that, as my own body continues to experience the effects of aging there are moments when my thoughts move in this direction. Yet, although I know that I shouldn’t have thoughts like this - I think I can forgive myself. I am after all, only human. The important thing to not forget to add what is the second part of Jesus’s Gethsemane: “Yet, not my will but yours be done.” When it comes to death, we will feel what we feel – let’s just avoid the temptation to try to be God instead of human beings.

Remembering that it is God’s will for our lives that we seek after helps us avoid potential misunderstanding as we listen to today’s reading from Acts and the Gospel of Luke. In Acts, we hear of the crowd’s reaction Peter’s healing of a lame man. Then, in the Gospel, the disciples encounter the risen Jesus in bodily form – not a ghost, but, as he says, a human in “flesh and bones.”

What is it we need to be cautious about as we think about these stories? If we aren’t careful, the part of us that resists accepting the reality of death might encourage us to reduce such biblical stories to advertising for The Convergence process. Be like the man Peter who Peter heals, or, be like the risen Jesus – become immortal and defy the clutches of death!

Of course, imagining that this is the message of these stories would merely be the product of our own desire to escape the reality of reality. Unlike the company in the novel *Zero K*, who sells desperate billionaires the promise of immortality, the message of Peter and the presence of the risen Jesus are not promoting the idea that you and I can and should become immortal like God.

The perfect health that Peter speaks of in the epistle is not that of pristine youthful bodies, but the spiritual health that is nurtured through faith. And the bodily presence of Jesus among the disciples in the gospel story is does not amount to erasing of the events of the crucifixion, as if it never happened. This is the point of Jesus showing the disciples the scars on his hands and feet. His body has experienced the same ravages that our vulnerable bodies can and will experience. But his resurrected presence reveals that death has no lasting victory over God. And so, we can trust that, whatever it is that lies on the other side of the mystery that is death, nothing can separate us from the reality and love of God – and we will continue to live in and through the resurrection of Jesus.

Thus far, I've been focusing on the impact that our fear of death can have on us as individuals. But the fear, or the ignoring, of the reality of death often also has an impact on the people around us, doesn't it?

The novel *Zero K* also explores this dynamic. The son of the man who decides to flee from death by having himself frozen is left deeply angry at his father. He resents the way his father cuts himself off from him; because the father acts as if there is no end to their relationship, but that his departure is no more than pressing the pause button. There are no great goodbyes; there is no chance to talk together about the past or what they have meant to each other. As the reader progresses through the novel's story, more the father becomes obsessed with avoiding death, the less attention and interest he gives to his son.

By contrast, the son recalls the profound impact he experienced while sitting with his dying mother, who had died some years previously. In the novel, he says, "I'd never felt more human than I did when my mother lay in bed, dying. This was not the frailty of a man who is said to be "only human," subject to a weakness or a vulnerability. This was a wave of sadness and loss that made me understand that I was a man expanded by grief."

This is an odd remark, is it not? "Expanded by grief?" What I think he means is not that grief and suffering are good things so we should seek them out. Instead, I think it means that living through such experiences honestly, and attentively, help us recognize what it is to be human, and what a gift our lives and our relationships with others are. When we try to run away from death or deny its reality, we are also running away from a core truth about ourselves, and, as a result, we are also avoiding talking about and living through this reality with those nearest and dearest to us. We close part of ourselves off from those who love us most. And, because of this, our relationships are impoverished. As the narrator of the novel observes, "Embracing the inevitability of death, we are compelled to live each moment fully, and appreciate the beauty and fragility of life, and to pursue what truly matters to us."

This morning, like every morning, when we pause for a moment and turn our thoughts to God in prayer, and as we present ourselves during the Eucharist at this altar, Jesus comes to us and says, "Peace be with you." Although we might be frustrated by the limitations of our imperfect bodies, Christ seeks to reassure us: "Peace be with you." Thought we might be afraid about our own death, or the death of someone dear to us, we are offered the message, "Peace be with you." Death was not the end of Jesus, and it will not be the end of us. We are God's children now, and after we pass from this life, we remain God's children. Let us, then, embrace the Easter promise revealed by the empty tomb, and resist the powerful denial of death that our culture encourages us to adopt. Let us pray to be able to say with confidence – today, and every day - "O death where is your sting," for "Christ has risen victorious from the grave." Whatever your health today. Whatever your age. However long you will yet walk this earth – may God's peace be with you - Amen.