

Death Antidote, March 31, 2024, St. Timothy, Burnaby
Isaiah 25.6-9; Psalm 118.1-2, 14-24; Acts 10.34-43; Mark 16.1-8

Prayer

Nobody expected Jesus to rise from the dead. He told them, over and over, but still, nobody believed him. None of his disciples were at the tomb, waiting for him to come back to life. Besides the few women that stayed to the end of his execution, the rest of his disciples had fled for their own safety. And yet, if they had been really paying attention, they would have expected all of this.

Jesus told them time and time again that he would be handed over to the authorities, that he would be tortured, and then killed. But that he would come back again. But they didn't believe him.

And yet, there was something else going on.

We have all come to expect death—death is nothing new. Sometimes it is shocking, sometimes it is tragic, sometimes it is a relief. Sometimes it is anticipated and expected, even beyond the usual expectation that we will all die, one day. None of us get out of life alive.

Death has been humanity's constant companion for all time—*every* human that has ever lived has died. (Okay, except maybe Elijah and Enoch and if you're Catholic, the Virgin Mary.) And though we are all resigned to the fact that we *will* die one day, there is still some hesitation about it. We still feel as though death is *wrong*, somehow. As though there is something *better* for us—that death gets in the way. That death *keeps us* from living our lives as we would otherwise.

It may sound ridiculous, but do we have the same reaction to losing our baby teeth? Do we feel as though we really wanted to keep those other, smaller, underdeveloped teeth? That we would rather *not* make room in our mouths for adult teeth and we protest and fight against the reality that those teeth will just fall out one day.

Or getting taller. That's just another fact of life that we can't control. We stop getting taller at a certain point in our development, of course. And, it even reverses somewhat if we get old enough. But it doesn't feel like growing is *wrong* in the same way that death is wrong. That we would prefer to avoid it—that it somehow represents a corruption or failure of the way things are *supposed* to be. We get used to death. We may accept it as inevitable, but it remains something we resist—in ways we don't resist our fingernails getting longer all by themselves.

The reading from Isaiah makes a promise for a better future—a future where there will be an abundance of food and wine and a future where people will live in safety. On the mountain, the Lord of hosts will consume death entirely, and wipe away every tear from all the faces. This may sound obvious, but there would be no need for God to wipe away tears that weren't there. Nor would there be a reason to hope for good food and good wine in abundance in an area of safety if those things already existed. We don't *hope* for what we already have. We hope for the things we desire—those things that continue to escape our grasp.

The comforting image of God wiping away tears from all the faces *on that day* is something we can only understand if we also understand what it feels like to *have* tears on our faces. We only talk about longing for good food if we don't have it already—or we don't have enough of it. The people that the passage from Isaiah was written to *did not have* an abundance of good food and wine—nor did they

have a place to enjoy it in safety. And that original audience, like all people in all time, were not *exempt* from death. They anticipated it, as we all do, though with some trepidation.

The promise given to them is that *one day* they will have what they desire. On that day, and in this very place (on this mountain) they will have rich food, and well-aged wines. But beyond that, they will also have *salvation*. God will swallow up death forever. They won't have to fear death again—death will be conquered.

The people who heard that prophecy the *first* time were eager to see it fulfilled. But so were the people who came later who heard that same prophecy. I would be willing to bet that *all* people (or, at the very least, the vast majority of all people throughout time) have been eagerly anticipating a *solution* to the problem of death. Dying continues to be the biggest hurdle to the continuance of human existence and, as we've already discussed, the primary naturally occurring phenomena that we continue to resist accepting. So it is only natural that when we hear a promise of a day to come where death will be defeated, as we heard from Isaiah, we will grasp that promise and hold on to it tightly.

And that is why, when Jesus appeared on the scene, that *hope* that had been held on to for generations seemed like it might finally be fulfilled. That there might be an answer to this problem that had plagued humanity for all time—death might finally be meeting its match.

All the signs were there that Jesus was different. He didn't function the way that other people did. He did things differently. And everywhere he went, people were amazed at him—they had never seen anybody do the things that he did, and regularly.

You might say that the people around Jesus were hard-wired to believe in something or someone which would address this problem of death—and it was a problem. A device to keep one's fingernails from growing too quickly would be nice, perhaps, but it wouldn't change the world. But someone who could finally stop *death* on the other hand, that is something worth paying attention to.

Death *feels* so wrong that we *want* to believe that there can be a solution to dying. And Jesus really looked like he was going to be the answer.

So, when I said that nobody expected Jesus to rise from the dead, that was true...and yet it was also at least a little bit *not* true.

Jesus had seemed like the answer. The antidote. The solution to the problem of death. That *hope* that people had clung to for generations was finally being embodied in the person of Jesus. He would be the one to fulfil that prophecy to Isaiah. Death would be destroyed. If anyone could conquer death, it would be Jesus.

Even though nobody ever had before.

So, nobody really expected Jesus to rise from the dead.

But that was probably because they didn't expect him to *die* in the first place. They had hoped that he would be the one to *avoid* death. They thought that conquering death looked like strength. Invulnerability. Resistance. And yet, in those last moments, Jesus looked weak. Tired. *Vulnerable*. Shockingly, and disappointingly *human*. And he *succumbed*. He failed. He didn't beat death.

So after that, nobody thought he could possibly rise from the dead. They hadn't understood it.

But he did. He rose again. He conquered death, *not* by resisting it, but by defeating it. Death could not hold Jesus. He *did* die, but that death couldn't conquer him. Death couldn't control Jesus. Couldn't *subdue* Jesus or his spirit.

Despite all the warnings, all the promptings, and all the hints, nobody expected Jesus to rise from the dead—but that was because nobody expected him to *die* in the first place. They all thought that they understood how Jesus would fulfil the prophecy and defeat death forever. And he has—just not in the way that anyone expected. Jesus did something different. He showed us how to live—and how to die, that we might live again, eternally. He led the way.

Just as Jesus called his disciples to follow him in his life, he called them to follow him in his death and resurrection as well. As the angel told the women, “he is going ahead of you [...] there you will see him.”

Two thousand years later, and we still haven't stopped hoping. We are *still* looking for the cure to death, still hoping that there will be a way that we can avoid dying. So often, just like those early disciples, we miss the signs that are right in front of us—we don't hear the words that God is saying to us: “follow me.” “I will go before you.”

On Easter Sunday, we celebrate the fact that the hope that we have carried for thousands of years has been realized: there *is* an answer to the problem of death. That answer is Jesus, who calls us to follow him: to follow him in carrying our cross, to give up our lives as he did for the sake of others, and then, when all hope seems lost, to cling to the truth that death has already been destroyed and cannot contain us either.

The prophet said, “It will be said on that day, ‘See, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.’” Today *is* that day. This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.