

The message given by Rev. Dr. Tom Zoelzer on Sunday, February 7, 2010 based on 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Standing in Line

A florist wanted to welcome a new pastor and his wife to town. So he sent a bouquet of flowers for the pastor's first Sunday. Later in the day the florist paid the pastor a visit. The pastor thanked the florist for the bouquet and then showed him the message on the accompanying card which read, "Sympathy." The florist was shocked. But the pastor assured him of his appreciation for the flowers.

"But you don't understand, explained the florist, "what bothers me is that the bouquet meant for you must have gone to a funeral. What will they think when they get a big bouquet that reads, 'best wishes in your new location'?"

There is something that we all have in common. This one thing is a reality for all of us. It does not matter our station in life or how old we are. It doesn't matter if we are the CEO of a major corporation or a homeless person. This is a reality no matter who we are. And that reality is the reality of death. Everything that lives, ceases to be. Everything that is will someday not. Death is the reality of living.

I find it fascinating that for a society that claims to be open and willing to talk about anything, death is the one thing we don't want to talk about – politics, sex, corruption – yes we will talk about these things – but death – no. Death is the great taboo that makes people afraid. So we don't talk about it. Death is the great unspoken in our land.

Well scripture speaks about it. In fact, today's scripture has a good news message to give us on this subject.

Our scripture today comes from the apostle Paul who is finishing up his long letter to the people of Corinth. He had just finish a discussion about how to do worship when he writes ⁻¹*Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters,*[□] *of the good news*[□] *that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand,*² *through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.* (This is serious stuff that Paul wants to talk about -

³*For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,*⁴ *and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures,*⁵ *and that he appeared to Cephas, (Peter) then to the twelve.* (the 11 picked by Jesus to be his inner circle plus the ⁶one picked after the resurrection) ⁶*Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters*[□] *at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died.*[□] ⁷*Then he appeared to James, (Jesus' brother) then to all the apostles. (people who have followed Jesus)*⁸ *Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.*⁹ *For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (at first Paul was a person who arrested people for declaring Jesus the Messiah)*¹⁰ *But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them— though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.*¹¹ *Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.*

Paul wanted to communicate some basic truth about Christianity – God overcame the power of death through the resurrection of Jesus and provides us the way to eternal life and resurrection living. The way to have eternal life, according to Paul, is to believe that Jesus is the way to God. Jesus is our expression of how to find life!

But there was one problem. Members of the Corinthian community were starting to die, and Paul had spoken about how Jesus was going to come again and they were all going to live with God in heaven. Jesus hadn't come yet.

There were others in their community who were convinced that since they were enlightened by the knowledge of God through Jesus, they had already experienced the resurrection and therefore they didn't need to worry about a bodily resurrection.

Paul wrote to tell them the good news – God had conquered the power of death by raising Jesus back to life and that Jesus was the first fruit of what was to come. Because of this reality, new life was upon us. However, until Jesus came again, the reality of a physical death was still with us. In the whole chapter of 1 Corinthians 15, Paul writes about a bodily resurrection to remind the readers that God honors all of us – body, mind and spirit – but that this resurrected body will be transformed into something new at the time of our resurrection. Paul writes that all who are part of Christ will be with God. Faith in God through Christ gives us life – life now and life to come. That's the good news – our faith is about life.

Well, Paul has been gone for a long time. But his words teach us that God is the keeper of the living and the dead. What God does through Jesus is transform our understanding of living - What we discover is that this life is chapter one of living, being with God is chapter 2.

Christianity does not allow us to run away from the reality of death but to embrace death as part of life. If we understand that Jesus died so that we could experience new life, then we come to understand that living

– dying – eternal life is part of what God has in mind for us. It is all part of the process.

Diana Butler Bass, a Christian historian, writes in her book, A People's History of Christianity, that back in the days when Christianity was an illegal religion, people came to Christ anyway because of how Christians lived. Christianity was illegal for many years because Christians would not accept the Emperor of Rome as a god or the son of god, and because of this they would be persecuted from time to time by the Roman authorities. But people came to respect Christians not only because they were willing to die for what they believed but also because their lack of fear of death did not cause them to run away. When a plague would break out and people would run away from the plague, the Christians would stay behind and take care of the sick. The Christians stayed because they believed whether they lived or died, they would eventually be with God and therefore there was nothing to fear.

Christianity survived the pressure of the Roman state because they were not afraid to die. They discovered that believing in God through Jesus was life giving no matter what.

That's the good news for us today – that the resurrection of Jesus points to the life giving power of God forever. So whether we are young and facing a hard time or mid-life and getting tired or later in life, God communicated that faith in God is life giving no matter what this situation. We are invited to do the things that bring life.

To be a Christian is to be able to say "Someday I am going to die, but that's OK because I have life now and life in the time to come. Jesus is my Savior."

Our faith in God through Christ helps us thrive no matter what our situation. A cab driver writes: I arrived at the address and honked the horn. After waiting a few minutes I walked to the door and knocked.. 'Just a minute', answered a frail, elderly voice. I could hear something being dragged across the floor.

After a long pause, the door opened. A small woman in her 90's stood before me. She was wearing a print dress and a pillbox hat with a veil pinned on it, like somebody out of a 1940's movie.

By her side was a small nylon suitcase. The apartment looked as if no one had lived there. All the furniture was covered with sheets. There were no clocks on the walls, no knickknacks or utensils on the counters. In the corner was a cardboard box filled with photos and glassware.

'Would you carry my bag out to the car?' she said. I took the suitcase to the cab, then returned to assist the woman.

She took my arm and we walked slowly toward the curb. She kept thanking me for my kindness. 'It's nothing', I told her.. 'I just try to treat my passengers the way I would want my mother treated'.

'Oh, you're such a good boy', she said. When we got in the cab, she gave me an address and then asked, 'Could you drive through downtown?'

'It's not the shortest way,' I answered quickly..

'Oh, I don't mind,' she said. 'I'm in no hurry. I'm on my way to a hospice'.

I looked in the rear-view mirror. Her eyes were glistening. 'I don't have any family left,' she continued in a soft voice.. 'The doctor says I don't have very long.' I quietly reached over and shut off the meter.

'What route would you like me to take?' I asked.

For the next two hours, we drove through the city. She showed me the building where she had once worked as an elevator operator. We drove through the neighborhood where she and her husband had lived when they were newlyweds. She had me pull up in front of a furniture warehouse that had once been a ballroom where she had gone dancing as a girl.

Sometimes she'd ask me to slow in front of a particular building or corner and would sit staring into the darkness, saying nothing. As the first hint of sun was creasing the horizon, she suddenly said, 'I'm tired. Let's go now'.

We drove in silence to the address she had given me. It was a low building, like a small convalescent home, with a driveway that passed under a portico. Two orderlies came out to the cab as soon as we pulled up. They were solicitous and intent, watching her every move. They must have been expecting her. I opened the trunk and took the small suitcase to the door. The woman was already seated in a wheelchair.

'How much do I owe you?' she asked, reaching into her purse.

'Nothing,' I said.

'You have to make a living,' she answered.

'There are other passengers,' I responded.

Almost without thinking, I bent and gave her a hug. She held onto me tightly.

'You gave an old woman a little moment of joy,' she said. 'Thank you.' I squeezed her hand, and then walked into the dim morning light.. Behind me, a door shut.

I didn't pick up any more passengers that shift. I drove aimlessly lost in thought. For the rest of that day, I thought about the preciousness of life, what a gift life is, and how each moment is to be experienced with hope. I also thought about how rich my life is because Jesus is in my life and how God was with me in all the chapters of my life so far and I am never really alone. I knew that day that life is not about standing in line waiting to die. Life is about living and getting the most out of each day with God at my side. Once I embraced my own morality, I was ready to live! Amen.