

Sermon Text: Mark 15:1-39

I have a 15-minute sermon. I have 10 minutes in which to preach it. I'm going to do the best I can!

A comedian once said that all of our birth certificates come with an expiration date. That's true enough. Right across from the birth date, usually on the left, on the right, there is a blank line waiting to be filled in, the date of death. You know, we spend a whole lot of time not thinking about our deaths from the time we realize what death is. Once, when Jesus was telling Peter that he must go to Jerusalem, that he must go to the so-called City of Peace to be killed, Peter said, “No, no, no that can't happen!” That's sort of what we do. We don't want to hear about death. We don't want to talk about death. We don't want to think about death.

There was a poll of 30,000 people in “Psychology Today,” the magazine once, and it found that one-third of them said they could not remember a single instance of death being mentioned in their household when they were children. The truth is I was one of those sorts of children. The very first funeral I ever attended in my life, I was the student minister there. The second funeral I attended, I officiated. If we don't talk about it, we think, maybe it won't happen to us.

Sin is another subject just like it. The popular view is that sin is an old-fashioned idea, just do whatever, I won't call you on yours, and you don't call me on mine, and we'll all pretend that there's no such thing as sin. Let's pretend that sin and death aren't real! Let's pretend there's no end to life, there are no consequences to behavior, no right, no wrong, let's just pretend that everybody's doing the best that they can.

A father knelt down beside his little girl's bed, and it was time for prayers and hugs and kisses and tucking in. She was doing the childhood prayer that we know, “Now I lay me down to sleep,” but this night she got the words mixed up. She prayed, “If I should wake before I die,” and then she was embarrassed, and said, “Oh, daddy, I've got the words wrong!” The dad said, “Now, wait a minute. Not at all, honey, in fact, that's probably the first time that prayer has been prayed properly. You see, my deepest desire is that you may truly wake up before you die.”

Sin is real, and that helps explain why the powers of this world be religious and the governmental powers use death as the weapon of last resort against the holiest and the most loving and the most compassionate man who ever walked this dusty earth. The powers of this earth are smug with death. Confront them, threaten them, and you just may get nailed to a cross. Sin and death are real. Jesus taught not only that God's will be done in Heaven as it is in Heaven, but on earth as it is in Heaven. Don't you see that makes God's will more important than any religious leaders' are established and more important than Rome, and Rome and the other powerful could not put up with such a threat, and so they shook their head knowingly, and they tried to handle Jesus the same way they always handled threats, with death, a public, humiliating death just in case any

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of His followers still had zeal to continue. A public, humiliating, warning death! That is why the cross and the tomb hold such a prominent place in our faith. The powers that be tried their best, and it had always worked before, but this time – and this is a real message – this time, the one whom we singled out at Christmas, the government will be upon His shoulders, this time the threat to worldly, flat dusty, bloody power did not stay dead. The tomb cannot hold the power of God. The tomb is about power. Ironically, unexpectedly, and to some unbelievably, the tomb is about power. Jesus took on the corrupt power of religious leaders and government authorities, and the leaders knew to expect a Messiah, but they would not give place for one, even when He stood before them. They would not step down when God showed up.

I think the Masters is still going on, isn't it? Is it still going on, or is it over? It's going on. Anybody remember Lee Trevino from years ago? Well, you may not know that Lee Trevino was struck by lightning when he was playing a tournament back years ago. He was sitting under a tree when the lightning hit the tree and him, and he said, “It bolted my arms and my legs out stiff, and it jerked me up and off the ground, and it killed me.” He was technically dead. He said there was no pain. Everything turned a warm gentle orange color. He said, “I saw my Mama, who had been dead for years. I saw other people from my life. It was like a newsreel that you read about. My life passed before my eyes. It was so present, so wonderful, I felt great. I thought, boy, this dying is really fun, and then I woke up in the hospital, badly burned and in pain, but I knew that I had come back to life for some reason.” He also said this, “When God wants to play through, you let Him.” The big message is this. Lee Trevino said after this experience, “I have no reason to fear death ever again. I can truly live.”

You see, this is why the tomb, the empty tomb, is about power. If you ever feel shy about your faith, if you ever feel timid about your faith, feel a temptation to trust lesser things like money or self-help gurus or political platforms over the power of God, you need to remember, and Jesus hugely angered all the most powerful people in Jerusalem and the greatest empire the world has ever known, Rome, and all they could do, the greatest weapon that they had, was death. The empty tomb screams, “Christians, you do not have to fear death or opinions of the powerful. God has overcome death on your behalf. God has embarrassed and revealed as impotent the greatest the power the powerful think they have, death!” Jesus' willingness to go to the cross, and their fearfulness in even placing guards at the tomb show that even they wondered, as the Centurion marveled, perhaps this was truly the Son of God, the Messiah who came to set things right, not just in the afterlife, but here and now, we as forgiven and bold people, fearless of judgment and fearless of death, can boldly live out our faith and stand up to whatever evil they think they have because we are God's children, and sin and death have no hold on us. We do not have to be quiet. We can say and sing our faith because we are freed from fear and freed from death and freed from judgment and sin and freed to live out our faith right here and right now.

I thought when it came out that I was not going to like the “Reader's Digest's” translation of the Bible. They did do one entitled The Message. I sort of do like it. Listen to these

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words from 1 Corinthians 15, “It was sin that made death so frightening and law-code guilt that gave sin its leverage, its destructive power, but now in a single victorious stroke of life, all three: sin, guilt, death are gone, the gift of our master, Jesus Christ. Thank God.” With all this going for us my dear, dear friends, stand your ground, and don’t hold back. Throw yourselves into the work of the Master. This means sometimes standing up because of Jesus Christ and saying things such as John Wesley did about slavery. He said, simply, and not poetically, but simply and faithfully and fearlessly, “It is wrong to buy and sell a human for whom Christ died.” That revealed his value to God, and that freed to him to follow God, and so no power on earth has the right to enslave him period. You see what boldness and what clarity a cross and tomb and resurrection-based faith gives our decisions. Worldly powers simply do not get to say who matters. In the same way and for the same reasons, Christians and other groups who know what partial birth abortion is are horrified that we are the only developed nation in the world which has legalized it.

God’s power and God’s salvation came here in Jesus Christ, and the powers of this world tried to kill it. God’s light came in Jesus Christ, and the powers of this world tried to put it out. The world not only wants God dead and gone so that we can pretend power, it wants God to stay dead and out of our business. Imagine the irony! Our business! We have no business but to love God and to love neighbor. That is our business. Our life assignment from 1 John is this, “Live deeply in Christ, then we’ll be ready for Him when He appears, ready to receive Him with open arms with no cause for red-faced guilt or lame excuses when He arrives, so live deeply in Christ.” You see, that message translation is pretty good. The things Jesus taught us to pray for and the thing we need God’s spiritual power to do is to live out God’s will on earth as it is in Heaven. The tomb was the very best that evil, earthly power could do, authorities could do, but Jesus and those of us who follow after Jesus have already conquered the world and the worst that it can do, and because the tomb was empty, we know who truly has power. It is God alone. True power belongs to God. Life comes from God, and that means all nations, all races, all ages are offered true love and true life from God in Christ. Who is it that we may hate in Christ’s name? Who is it that we may dismiss and ignore in Christ’s name? Who is it we may kill in Christ’s name? Now, I know that nations and situations and complications come into things, but after our expiration date, after our death, God will ask us, not what civic group, not what party, not what philosophy we follow, instead God will ask did you not understand that in the cross and in that empty tomb and in the resurrection I took away the power of sin and death and freed you to live as I have always wanted you to live from the very beginning, in love with me and in love with your neighbors. From the beginning, we have confused the terms of what a relationship with God is like. God leads in this dance. We have no lasting power. Sin and death do get us all, and God alone has given us the power over sin and death. On our own, our cleverest technology and fashionable ideas of the moment are nothing. They are empty if based on someone seeking power over someone else.

Romans 8 from The Message translation says, and I love this, it says, “A new power is in operation. The spirit of life in Christ, like a strong wind has magnificently cleared the

“Why the Tomb?”

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air, freeing you from a fated lifetime of brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death. God went for the jugular when He sent His own son. He didn't deal with the problem as something remote and unimportant. In His son, He personally took on the human condition, entered the disordered mess of struggling humanity in order to set it right once and for all. Faith in Jesus Christ is not sitting here bored, waiting for, as they used to say, pie in the sky when you die. There is a Heaven, yes, and Jesus opened the door for us, yes, but we are to live fearlessly free and for God now. There is life. There is new life, and there is eternal life available for the asking, available for the turning, available for the repenting, turning away from self and toward God, the same God we were created to be in relationship with, the same God we have rejected, and chosen self instead, time after time. That God came to us, comes to us in His Holy Spirit, and offers us new life. The tomb means that Jesus took these on and won, that Jesus stormed the gates of Hell on our behalf! Life and new life are gifts from God and should not be wasted on the trivial. We have tried to save the world without God, and we are still trying to save the world without God. It cannot be done.

On this day especially as we remember and we grieve the loss of your former pastor, we remember that the tomb could not hold Jesus, and will not keep our gracious God from holding His children with Him forever. It has no final power. Jesus left His tomb, and He left the door open for us to come to Him. So, live fearlessly *for* God now and eternally, *with* God forever now and eternally. That is the life of faith, and that is the answer to the question, why the tomb? Jesus took on sin and death, and defeated them so that we can live fearlessly now and eternally with Him forever. Because of that great gift, do not waste your life on the trivial. Live for God. In Jesus name, Amen.