

## **ETERNAL LIFE BEGINS NOW**

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, April 23, 2017  
based on II Corinthians 4:8-10, 4:16-5:1; John 5:24***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “The Points of the Cross—How the Cross of Christ Can Save You.” Today’s message is particularly a follow-on to last Sunday’s Easter sermon, where we considered how Christ—through the cross and resurrection—has dealt directly with our human problem. Jesus does not try to skirt around or smooth over our human troubles; rather, on the cross, he directly confronts our brokenness and our sin and our pain, and finally confronts death itself—head on. In so doing, he creates for us a genuinely new future. We continue that theme this morning. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

Like Jesus, the apostle Paul dealt with our human condition in very straightforward fashion. In the passage that we heard from II Corinthians, he said “we are afflicted in every way” (II Cor. 4:8)—he acknowledged our very serious human troubles—and he observed that “our outer nature is wasting away.” (II Cor. 4:16) The older you get, the more you see that happening. He plainly acknowledged the transitory nature of life, comparing our earthly body to a tent—a transitory structure—and speaking of “when the earthly tent that we live in is destroyed . . .” (II Cor. 5:1). He faced death head on.

This is something that many people try not to do. We prefer to avoid the reality of death, and our culture helps us to do that. Modern medicine keeps people living longer, cosmetics keep people looking younger, and when death does happen in our society it is generally shielded from our view. But actually the human tendency to avoid thinking about death is age-old. Epicurus, who lived around 300 B.C., and who was the founder of the “eat, drink, and be merry” school of philosophy, once made the statement, “Death doesn't bother us, because as long as we're here, death is not here, and when death arrives, we're no longer here.”<sup>i</sup> That statement encapsulates how people in every age have often tried to approach our situation—just ignore death, since it is not real for us, as long as we're here.

But of course sometimes reality breaks in upon us. It is notable that while modern technology in some ways shields us from the reality of death, in other ways technology confronts us more often with death. There was the case this past week, for example, of the disturbed man in Cleveland who posted the random murder he committed on Facebook, then finally took his own life as he was cornered. There are also of course the ISIS terrorists who have posted grisly killings for all to see; and the news media can report to us disasters and deaths from every part of the world. We see images of death every day. Then death strikes closer to home when a loved one dies, or when we ourselves face a serious illness that reminds us of our own mortality, or when our aches and pains tell us that our body will not last forever. As the theologian Hans Schaefer put it, “We experience a wearing away of the substance out of which we exist.”<sup>ii</sup> In various ways we are confronted by the reality that the ancient church expressed in a poignant phrase in a Latin hymn: “In the midst of life we are in

death.” (*media vita in morte sumus*)

So what do we do? The typical human response is an intensified effort to avoid and deny death; and this takes two major forms in our time. One approach is *the quest for significance*. People try to give their lives some sort of grand dimension, by attaining fame or status or wealth, because this makes people feel that they are somehow bigger than death—the more grandeur that you have, the more immortal you feel. But this of course is an illusion, and the quest for significance leads to all sorts of folly, as people spend their lives grasping after things that will in fact soon vanish. The Psalmist put it bluntly: “Human beings cannot abide in their pomp; they are like the beasts that perish.” (Psalm 49:12)

Moreover, the quest for significance often leads people to trample over other people in the race for personal greatness. The most glaring example of that today is North Korea’s dictator Kim Jong-un, whose extreme grandiose posturing would be comical if it were not so dangerous. Millions suffer because of his personal quest after greatness. But there are many examples of where one person’s race for the top hurts many others. It is significant that in sharp contrast with that human drive for greatness Jesus exhibits precisely the opposite movement. As it is said in Philippians, “He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.” (Philippians 2:7)

The other very common way in which people try to counteract death is through *the quest for maximum experience*. In this approach, people acknowledge that death is out there, but they seek to offset death by cramming as much as possible into life. The contemporary form of this is the widely-discussed “bucket list.” You hear all sorts of suggestions about what you ought to have on your bucket list, the idea being that you should scramble like mad to get as much as possible into your bucket, before you finally kick it. The problem is that no one’s bucket is big enough, and the bucket list is endless. So anyone chasing after a bucket list will experience a mounting desperation as the effort to grasp after everything falls short, as even what we do grasp proves transient, and as death keeps drawing nearer. The theologian Hans-Jürgen Feldmann summed things up well: “Whoever does not come to terms with death places upon life impossible demands.”<sup>iiii</sup>

What do you suppose was on Jesus’ bucket list? Not much, apparently. He never left the region of Palestine. He died in his early thirties. He took no exotic vacations. Yet we would consider Jesus to have lived life more fully than anyone.

The story of Jesus runs absolutely counter to the centuries-old tendency to ignore or run away from death. Jesus does not engage in any form of denying death; to the contrary, he openly acknowledges his oncoming death, and he confronts death squarely. He looks at death not with illusions or with escapism but with faith. We have seen what happens next in this sermon series. Jesus on the cross enters into death. He takes all the consequences of our human sinfulness upon himself, in a radical act of self-giving. There on the cross he atones for our sin and reconciles us to God. He enters into the grave; but then, with the victory over sin and death won on the cross, God raises Jesus from the dead on Easter. So Jesus conquers death, and he opens the way for us not only into life beyond the grave but into full, real life

now.

People often want to think of Easter as giving us the hope for heaven, which it certainly does; but Jesus says that all this also has profound significance for our life right now. In his early teaching, in the passage we heard from the gospel of John, Jesus said, “Those who hear my word and believe Him who sent me have eternal life . . . they have passed from death into life.” (John 5:24) Notice that Jesus does not say, “They *will* pass from death into life,” as though we are talking here purely about a future beyond this life in heaven; he says, “they *have* eternal life . . . they have passed—already—from death into life.” In short, eternal life begins now.

When we have faith, it completely changes our relationship to death. Rather than ignoring or running away from death, we can acknowledge that death is real, that our bodies are mortal; like Jesus we can face death squarely. But because of Jesus, death no longer has power over us. Through Jesus we are brought into eternal fellowship with God, and so we no longer need to engage in all those death-denying strategies that have been so common to our human condition. Rather than getting caught up in the vain quest after significance or the futile quest after endless experience, we can live, as Jesus did, in genuine life—we can share in the love of God, we can find meaning in being part of God’s Kingdom, we can join in God’s purposes in the world, we can be a part of what truly lasts.

We find the early disciples making precisely this sort of movement in the aftermath of Easter. Prior to Easter, they were confused and running from death—quite literally—as Jesus was arrested. But when they put their faith in the Risen Christ, their attitude in life completely changed. Instead of living in fear and desperation, they were filled with a new vitality and confidence and hope and joy, and they went forth with boldness to proclaim the gospel. Even as they faced considerable challenges, they shared in that attitude expressed by the apostle Paul: “We do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure. We are looking not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen, but what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.” (II Cor. 4:16-18) As they trusted in Christ, they lived in the power and promise of his eternal kingdom. Eternal life had begun for them now.

So the disciples found genuine life as they discovered in Jesus the answer to death. We likewise can find genuine life as we put our faith in Christ, and as we open ourselves to how Christ would deliver us from the power of death, and as we let Christ bring us into the real and eternal life that begins now.

- i. Epikurus, quoted in *Tod*, 18.
- ii. Hans Schaefer, quoted in *Tod*, 29.
- iii. Hans-Jürgen Feldmann, *Im Tod das Leben*, 233.