“*The Seventh Sign*”

John 11:1-45

Murray M Cooper

First Presbyterian Church of Richland

April 2, 2017

As a chaplain, I am called to the beside of someone who has died or is dying. My job is to provide spiritual comfort to someone who is dying and their family and friends. Hospitals have an interesting term for someone who is dying. The patient is described as “actively dying.” During this period of “actively dying,” life may be sustained by heroic medical procedures. But these procedures may not guarantee continued meaningful life. During this time, the patient and family need to decide whether to use these efforts or let the patient die a natural death. Not an easy decision.

So, what is this thing we call death? We often have a sense of when it approaches and when it happens. But when we try to describe or define it, we end up using negatives. Basically, we end up describing death as not alive. We don’t know what death is, we only know what it is not.

For most of history, defining death as not alive sufficed. When you stopped breathing or your heart stopped beating, you were dead. In the last 100 years, medical science has blurred the line between life and death. In many cases when you stop breathing, breathing can be done for you either by CPR or a mechanical ventilator. If your heart stops, it can often be restarted. So, death occurs when medical science can no longer sustain the bodily life functions.

I have been present when someone who is dead is restored to life. But we must be careful where we go from here. I know of no doctor who would claim to have the power to defy death. They would describe their work as using modern medical technology to prolong the life of someone whose body systems are failing. The patient appears dead, no heartbeat, no breathing, but are they dead or only “actively dying”?

So, do we have an adequate definition of what death is? Perhaps for legal or medical maters, defining death as the body’s inability to sustain life functions is sufficient. But a better answer is available from a spiritual perspective. We know from the Bible that death occurs at the moment a person’s spirit leaves the body. From this perspective, death is only a moment in time, dividing the time when the spirit is present in the body and when it is absent.

So, if death occurs when the spirit leaves the body, when does the spirit leave the body? In many ancient cultures, the belief was that the spirit lingered near the body for varying lengths of time. Since ancient times, Judaism has held that the spirit lingers near the body for three days before it goes to heaven. For the majority of Christians, the belief is that the spirit immediately leaves the body and goes to dwell with Jesus Christ, awaiting the final resurrection.

Every three years, on the last Sunday of Lent, we have John’s account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. This is very appropriate because arguably it begins the Passion of Christ. In the verses following today’s text we hear that some of the people who witnessed this act reported it to the Pharisees. Hearing this, the Pharisees and priests of the Temple decided they needed to kill Jesus. At this point, Jesus’ fate was sealed.

But this story, perhaps the longest in the Lectionary, is much more important than just the moment in which Jesus’ fate was sealed. In the gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, we hear stories of Jesus performing miracles. But the gospel of John does not talk of miracles, rather it talks of signs performed by Jesus. For John, these signs performed by Jesus pointed to Jesus as the Lord of Creation, the one who had control of all of creation.

John tells of seven signs performed by Jesus, although he tells us that there were others not recorded in his gospel. The first sign shows how Jesus’ ability to transform the creation by changing water into wine. Another sign shows Jesus’ ability to create things, the feeding of the 5000. Jesus also shows he is not bound by the laws of nature by walking on the water. There are also three stories of Jesus healing people, he has power over living things.

But to most people, the seventh sign is the most astounding. Jesus has the power to bring the dead back to life. To understand the import of the sign Jesus is about to perform we must pay careful attention to verse 39 which occurs at the entrance to Lazarus’ tomb. “39 Jesus said, ‘Take away the stone.’ Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, ‘Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.’”

Lazarus has been in the tomb four days. Any Jew present would know that by the fourth day Lazarus’ spirit would have departed. And if that is not enough, John tells us there is a stench from the tomb. In the warm climate of Palestine, Lazarus’ body has begun to decompose. Jesus replies to Martha, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

Jesus commands Lazarus to come out of the tomb. Lazarus walks out of the tomb, whole of body. He is alive. Not only is Jesus able to control the creation, but his power extends into the spiritual world. Jesus is able to restore Lazarus’ decomposing body and return Lazarus’ spirit to his restored body. Jesus has power over death itself. We hear of Lazarus only once more. John tells us that six days before the Passover Jesus shares a meal with Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. We hear nothing more of him other than that the chief priests desire to kill Lazarus.

For John, Jesus’ time among us was a preparation for the coming kingdom. Jesus, the divine human, walked among us, doing his works, that we might know he was the Lord of creation, God incarnate. He revealed to us who God is and God’s plan for the creation. He died on the cross and rose again, the first fruits of the promised resurrection to eternal life. For John, Jesus’ resurrection was an act of new creation, the arrival of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus the Christ has shown us that he has power over all that God has created. He may do with it as he wishes, even bringing about a new creation. He has also shown us that he has power over death itself and can resurrect the dead to life eternal in the new creation. Why then do we fear death? Why are we so afraid of death that we will not even talk about it? What is it that we fear?

In the end, for those who believe in God’s promise of eternal life, death is nothing to fear. Death is not a thing, but a mark, a dividing point between life in this world and the world to come. When we die, we don’t remember our death. Rather we look back and see a moment when we passed from life to life, much as when you look in a rearview mirror and see you have driven from one state into another.

For those approaching their own death it is fear of the possibility of pain and suffering before death, not fear of death. For those who live on after the death of a loved one it is the fear of living without the presence of one who was so important in our lives, not fear of death. I don’t make light of this. Pain, suffering, and loss are real things in this life. But like our Lord Jesus who suffered and died we will rise again into life eternal and those whom we lost we will be with again. This is God’s plan and promise for the world to come, the Kingdom of God.