

Disappointing Death

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 May 2005

Preacher: Rev. Don Curry

[0 : 01] David had that sort of look on his face which suggests that he isn't coming to shake my hand, but something more. Anyway, thank you, David.

We all need encouragement from the rector whenever we can get it. Anyway, he was telling a story about presents, and I was traveling up in the northwest frontiers currently where the American army is trying to flush out al-Qaeda.

And I was visiting a TV program, and it was Jeremy's birthday coming up. So I got to this little town, fortified, and everyone carrying guns. This is an area where a gun is like a woman's purse for a man.

I mean, you wouldn't, you know, sort of go out to the house without something. Anyway, there's a little bazaar about the size of this church here with about eight stores, and three of them were dry goods stores where you could buy peas and lentils and rice.

And five others were non-dry goods stores. So I thought, well, I'll go and see if I can get something for Jeremy. And I went in, and they were all gun stores. And I went into one, and I looked around, didn't see anything.

[1 : 10] I went to the next one, still didn't see anything. I thought, well, I better ask. Maybe they'll have something. So I said, I've got a six-year-old son, and I'm just looking for a present. Any ideas? I said, well, we've got this pen. It only shoots one .22 caliber bullet.

But very, you know, it's very good. It's light, easy to carry for a younger child. I said, he's only six. He said, well, that's fine. You've got to start with something like this. So I said, no. They said, well, what about a pistol? It's only about \$2.

It's a copy of the Russian one. And so we went through a list of different things, and I realized sort of what was available for children and why some of those parts of the world continue to have problems.

And as long as the Americans there will continue to have problems. We will not solve the way that they make toys for their children. The talk today is on disappointing death, lessons from the seventh sign.

And we're looking today at the story of Lazarus, a story that is familiar to many of us that I'd like us to go over. As I was thinking about this talk, my mind went back to one of the first patients I saw in the desert.

[2 : 21] Some of you may be aware, for over 20 years, my wife and I and our children lived in southern Pakistan. We were supported by St. John's as missionaries and were involved in seeking to be the presence of Christ to Muslims and Hindus that were there.

And as we moved into this village, initially we didn't have any people coming. They thought I was a bit of a quack. Who else would leave a city and move to a village unless he was under some sort of cloud of malpractice or something.

But eventually people did start coming. And one of the first patients was Rahim Bibi. She was emaciated, weighed less than 60 pounds, just skin taut, overbone, and large, hopeful brown eyes. She was carried in from about 40 miles away by two men, her brothers, on a stretcher that they'd made up. She couldn't walk. She could hardly talk.

Her voice was a whisper. Her husband had left her because she had tuberculosis. And she arrived at my doorstep. She had nowhere else to go.

[3 : 24] I examined her, saw that she had extensive tuberculosis. We started treatment. And over a period of three to four months with daily treatment, she stayed in a friend's little house near us.

And I would visit her every day, go and see her. From day to day, we could see no difference. But gradually, as the weeks led into months, it was like pouring a bit of water onto a plant that has been

totally dried out and where there seems to be no life.

And gradually, Rahim Bibi came to life. By the end of three months, she was able to sit and do some of her own housework. By the end of six months, she'd finished the course of treatment, and she walked back to her own village.

And over the next 15 years, she would come back periodically, bringing other patients with her. And she would always talk about how she had almost been near death and how this treatment had been so significant.

She was one of the reasons why I never found medicine so rewarding as I did in that village, even though every story did not have as a positive outcome as Rahim Bibi's.

[4 : 30] Palestine in the time of Jesus would have been very similar to the desert at that time. Malaria, leprosy, other infectious diseases would have taken a huge toll on young and old. The herbalists and other people had little that they could do.

So Jesus was familiar with illness. He had people coming all the time. In fact, had to escape at times. As we look at this passage, we're aware that Jesus has just been in Jerusalem. He has just been down in the temple preaching and teaching. And he has done something which has the whole city abuzz. He has healed a man born blind who had been sitting at the temple gates all his life.

The city of Jerusalem was astir. Who was this man? Healing blind is one thing. To a man born blind is something far greater. And this raised and resulted in a huge degree of opposition.

Jesus almost was stoned. And so now he's retreated. Jesus has returned. And this story starts off. Jesus is beyond the Jordan, the very place where John the Baptist was baptizing.

[5 : 35] Almost a circle. It's been two and a half years, almost three years of ministry. In this very place, Jesus himself was baptized by John. He has traveled much. And now he is preparing for his final journey to Jerusalem.

Is it not appropriate that he should leave from this place? He knows what he's heading into when he goes back. His disciples said to him, Jesus, why are you going back? Don't you know you're almost stoned?

And he said, there is only 12 hours in the day. The night is coming. The circle had come full. And then he gets a message.

A very simple one. Lord, the one you love is sick. With the obvious unsaid implication, come quickly, but not said. And Jesus does what is not obvious.

He waits for two days. Then he goes on to say to his disciples that he is going because there's a greater glory that he wants to see happen.

[6 : 37] We don't know all the reasons behind why Jesus waited. As much as we don't know for a lot of the reasons why our prayers are not answered. Why the dreams that we have are sometimes broken.

One day we will know. Mary and Martha certainly did not understand why the man that cared for their brother who was so close could not come.

But we know from the story as it moves along that Jesus had a greater end in mind. His purpose was not just to heal someone from illness. His very purpose was to raise someone from the dead. And not just anyone, but a respected, obviously influential man very close to Jerusalem. It was to be a miracle of compassion and a miracle of life.

Even as the last miracle that he did giving the blind man sight was a miracle of light. And it reflects to us back the theme that runs through all the Gospel of John that John sees so clearly.

[7 : 36] He opens the Gospel in 1 verse 4. In him, and I'm quoting John, Jesus was life, and that life was the light of men. So this final miracle ties things together.

Jesus has been seen as the light, and now we will see how he is the light. I guess one of the things that has affected me greatly coming back from Pakistan, a place where death is all around me, is to realize in coming back to Canada, I've moved into a culture of death far more pernicious than I ever saw in Pakistan.

God, I've moved into a world and spoke to us last week in our first session, our first look at the series.

And for those of you that have this, there's a green card which will give you the approach that we're taking for the next ten weeks on death and dying and what it means for the Christian to face that.

One thing David said is that we seek to domesticate death, to redefine death in terms of our individual rights. Death then becomes our choice, our right to choose the time and place, even as the unborn child is also ours to choose whether to live and die.

[8 : 54] In this culture of death that we live in, death becomes a solution to our problems, not an enemy. For there is no sin, there is no evil. Suffering is a social problem, not a moral one.

It may be solved by removing the suffering from our midst. Thus, death is to be embraced as a means to remove suffering. If you get an opportunity, look in your doctor's office sometime for the Hippocratic Oath.

It's interesting to try. As I've worked in different doctor's offices, I've oftentimes looked for it. Usually, it's not there anymore. The oath that I took, the part of it, that spoke about death and dying, is this. And this is the original oath that was, and physicians have been, in the West anyway, have been reciting on graduation for the last 2,000 years, as designed by Hippocrates, 500 years before the time of Christ.

This is an oath that is 2,500 years old. This is the section that's pertinent to us. I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody who asks for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect.

[10 : 06] Similarly, I will not give to a woman an abortive remedy. In purity and holiness, I will guard my life and my art. This is a man outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition who penned this, but it has been members of the Judeo-Christian tradition that have held on to this.

Let me read to you what is more common. I will respect the privacy of my patients, and this is one in many doctors' offices and is now used in many medical schools. This comes from Harvard. Of course, we're not required to take it, but if you want an oath, this is what's available.

I will respect the privacy of my patients, for their problems are not disclosed to me that the world may know. Most especially must I tread with care in matters of life and death. If it has given me to save a life, all thanks.

But it may also be within my power to take a life. This awesome responsibility must be faced with great humbleness and awareness of my own frailty. Above all, I must not play God.

If taking a human life for a perceived good is not playing God, what is? In April 2001, a Dutch law permitting both euthanasia and assisted suicide was approved.

[11 : 19] That law went into effect April 1st, 2002. It requires that the physician has terminated a life or assisted suicide with due care. That is what the law requires, due care.

That the procedure be carried out in a medically appropriate fashion. It transforms the crimes of euthanasia, which for the last 2,000 years have been considered crimes, into medical treatment. In April of this year, a Dutch pediatrician, Edward Verhagen, who works at Groningen University, is one of a group of doctors who has proposed what is called the Groningen Protocol to decide how much a child has to be suffering to be considered worthy of being killed by lethal injection.

In a recent interview on National Public Radio, Verhagen said, We felt that in these children the most humane course of action would be to allow the child to die and even actively assist them in their death.

In extreme cases, the best way to protect life is sometimes assist a little bit in death. This is a pediatrician. This is a man who has been committed to take care of children.

[12 : 24] Studies done in Holland since 2001 report that more patients are put to death in Dutch hospitals without their permission than with.

In fact, cases of killing without consent outnumber the ones that do. In a recent court case in Holland, a doctor injected fatal drugs into an elderly woman after she told him she didn't want to die. He was acquitted. Such legally sanctioned abuses have created a climate of fear among elderly persons and obviously among all people disabled in Holland. They wear arm bracelets telling doctors not to end their lives prematurely or try to relocate to nursing homes across the border in Germany where euthanasia is still illegal.

So in Europe, a culture of death. So in Canada, I work in a hospital where older people are routinely labeled by physicians DNR.

Anyone know what that means? Do not resuscitate. Normally, in the past, that has been a decision made by families in a suffering situation where the individual says, I don't want extreme measures to be taken.

[13 : 37] Now, it can be made by a physician without even discussing with the family. If you're old, if you have gray hair, if you may not be able to communicate well, a doctor can write that down.

This is happening under our noses. Holland has come in his coming. I'm sorry for digressing. As a physician, these issues are deeply serious to me.

As a father, these issues. And as an individual who lived in a culture that did not have Judeo-Christian roots but respected the aged, honored them, cared for them, I am shocked to come back to a culture which no longer respects that.

I'm shocked to come back to a culture where value is dependent upon economic output. How much we can produce. If you can't produce, wear a bracelet.

Let's go back to the story of Lazarus because I think it teaches us deeply about what our attitude should be to death and dying because it speaks very clearly of how Jesus dealt with it.

[14:51] This story I will not take time to go over in detail. There are three parts. The first part that I've alluded to where Jesus was taking a rest, he was away, he heard that Lazarus was dying, very sick, he delayed.

The second part we have, or the second scene is Jesus outside the village of Bethany. Jesus doesn't even get in as far as Mary and Martha's home before Martha runs out and says, Jesus, if you'd only been here, your friend would not have died.

And Jesus makes that wonderful statement to her. Mary, do you believe that I am the resurrection and the life? We'll address that later. And then Jesus moves closer toward the tomb and is torn. He's filled with emotion. The very creator of the universe grieves and weeps. and then the very end of the story where he's at the tomb and he speaks and calls Lazarus out.

A simple word, a command. Lazarus, come out and then Lazarus and then he commands the others, take off the grave clothes. What a build-up.

[16:02] What a powerful picture. A story that we have heard and therefore we know the ending. If we didn't, we would be on the edge of our seats as we wait to see what happens. Almost a dress rehearsal for what was going to happen in a month or two.

How many similarities do we see? The mourning women are also there. The rock-hewn tomb closed with a stone that is opened. The grave clothes.

Even with a separate mention of a face cloth as in a resurrection. Not even forgetting Thomas. Even Thomas is there. What a beautiful symmetry.

In many ways, John chapter 11 and John chapter 20, they cover the time of Jesus' passion and point the direction to where our eyes should be looking.

I think as we look at this story, there are three major principles that I'd like us to take home with. Take home with us. The first principle is that death angers and grieves the heart of a loving God.

[17:12] Several times we read about how Lazarus is loved. Verse 3 says, So the sister sent word to Jesus, Lord, the one you love is sick. Jesus loved Martha and Mary and her sister Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

The people around in verse 36 said, See how he loved them. Thus, Jesus' anger is not surprising, as is none of ours when we're facing death. Anger is an appropriate emotion.

Anger is an acceptable emotion. Death is an enemy. Death is never meant to be a solution. Death is something that we fight to the end. Death is not a gift of God.

God may use death to take us. God may allow death to happen. But death is never a friend. The words in verse 33 speak, Jesus was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.

It expresses in the Greek not only being upset, but also angry. Why was Jesus angry? We don't know. Again, one of those questions maybe we'll have a chance to ask.

[18:18] But we do know that in several situations we read of Jesus being upset. Oftentimes, when there is a very clear conflict with the powers of death and destruction.

And they all testify to the fact that his primary conflict was the prince of this world. And it was an infinitely costly one for him. I think that the immediate presence of death, of the hopeless unbelief of his own disciples in the face of death, Jesus was facing face to face that power which he had come to destroy.

A power which is met by the wrath of him who is the author of life and which had to be cast out. But the only way this power was to be cast out was by the ultimate sacrifice.

The only way this power was to be broken was to be the death of the very author of life. Jesus was moved with deepest emotions. And Jesus wept.

Jesus stood in front of the tomb and people say, why would Jesus weep? I mean, he knew he was going to raise Lazarus. Why would he cry? He knew there was going to be a good ending. Mary and

Martha didn't. He did.

[19 : 33] I believe that Jesus was looking not at that grave only. He was looking at the grave yards of the centuries. He was looking at the battlefields of the world that have seen innocent men and women suffer.

He was looking into homes where little children have been abused. He was looking through the death and suffering that sin has brought into this world. And he wept. He wasn't looking just at Lazarus' tomb.

But that tomb was a symbol of everything that he had come to fight against. That tomb was a symbol of what Jesus had come to break. These were tears of sympathy.

Jesus wept. And isn't it appropriate for us when faced with death and dying to weep and to be angry? Heaven help us if we, in seeking to console people, say, don't be angry.

If we, seeking to console people, say, don't weep, it'll be okay. It would have happened anyway. And how many times have we heard even from dear friends those sorts of uncomfoting words? Maybe the best thing we can do is get angry with a person.

[20 : 45] Maybe the best thing we can do is cry with them and not try to give any simple solutions. The essence of suffering, the essence of death, is tied to the meaning of sin.

In Pakistan, one of the big struggles we had in translating the scriptures was how we, which words we use for sin. In the, from Sanskrit, the word for sin is pap.

Pap is a, is a word that's used in the Hindu faith to describe a transgression, the best way to translate it. If you happen to kill an animal, that's a pap.

If you make a mistake, it's regrettable but reversible with good works. And it's so easy for us to have a similar view of sin. Sin is merely a mistake that we make that we ask forgiveness for.

Sin is a regrettable behavior that we can just turn around and be good next week. Scripture sees sin far more perniciously, far more destructively, as the very essence of rebellion against a loving God that brings destruction down on our heads.

[21 : 53] The sort of powerful, destructive force that could only be broken by the ultimate sacrifice. I remember in Pakistan, a man came to me who had tuberculosis and I saw a lot of people coughing up blood, emaciated.

This man was actually in pretty good shape. He was wealthy. He came from a landowning family. He came into the clinic where there were many other TB patients, many of them who were emaciated and poor.

And this man was obviously of a different cut. He had good clothes and he'd been told that he had tuberculosis. He came to talk to me. So I took his x-ray. We looked at his sputum. His sputum was filled with TB bacilli.

He was actively coughing them up. He was a case of tuberculosis. So I sat down with him. I said to him, you have tuberculosis. I looked at his x-ray. It was in both lungs.

I said, you need treatment. He said, don't tell me. My family isn't that sort of family. I'm not like these people around here, these poor people. Our family has never had tuberculosis. That's a disease of the poor.

[22 : 54] I don't have TB. Just give me some cough medicine. I know this is just an irritative cough. I don't need that sort of treatment. And I don't want to be identified with these people. I spent time talking with him.

He refused to take my advice. He left. Went out to some local compounders. Took medicine. I asked after him. Within six months, he was dead. A man, because of his pride, refusing to accept the seriousness of his condition.

And over and over again, spiritually, that's what we do. Don't we? We feel we're pretty good. We feel we've done pretty well. Oftentimes, we measure ourselves against others who do worse.

Church can be a place where we come to show out how spiritual we are. Jesus Christ had to die because sin was a destructive force.

Church is a place where we all come because we're wounded. Church is a place where we all come because we're sinners and we need to confess. This is a place for the sick.

[23 : 59] This is a place for those who need help. This is a place for those of us that don't have our lives all together. This is a place where healing happens.

This is a place where Jesus is. So if you are in that situation, if you have come because you're hurting, if you've come because something has happened in your life that has broken it, you're in

the right place.

So death is not only something that angers and grieves the heart of God, but Jesus has come and in this story tells us that death, reign over mankind, is broken.

And in the raising of Lazarus paints a small picture of the resurrection that's going to happen. Jesus disappoints death at the grave of Lazarus and in this miracle points toward a greater miracle to come when the sway of death over mankind will be broken on the cross.

It's interesting, Jesus calls Lazarus by name and in a loud voice. Nowhere else do we hear in John Jesus speaking in a loud voice. That is unique. Why did Jesus have to speak in a loud voice?

[25 : 15] The synoptics, sorry, Matthew, Mark, and Luke talk about Jesus speaking in a loud voice specifically on the cross when he called out, it is finished.

In St. John's, that cry comes here at the point, again, where Jesus confronts the power of death. I believe Jesus wasn't just speaking into a tomb and to people around.

I believe Jesus was speaking to all of creation. I believe when he stood up and says, Lazarus, come out, he wanted the whole world to hear. He wanted us to hear. He wanted to hear the powers and principalities that none of us can see that surround us.

And he wanted it to be a foretaste of what he speaks about in chapter 5. The hour is coming and now is when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.

His voice was not just for Lazarus, it was for all of us. And those who hear will live, for as the Father has life in himself, so he granted the Son also to have life in himself.

[26 : 19] Jesus' word had calmed the sea. It now calls the dead back to life. And Jesus backs up this miracle with a very clear statement of who he is.

Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life. And he says this to Martha before he has raised Lazarus.

In fact, he asks her to accept something that she hasn't seen. You know, he doesn't say, I give life. I have come to give life. I have come to give resurrection.

He says, I am the resurrection and the life. And what does that mean to us? I think that means that this is much more than just life like you or I have. If you or I die, nothing happens to the fabric of the world.

If you or I die, no one else is affected. Close family are saddened. But Jesus, who is life, is unique.

[27 : 29] his is the life that gives life and sustains life. His life is the necessary life and the source of all other life. He goes on to say, whoever lives and believes in me will never die.

The third thing that I want us to remember, not only that we have a God who loves us and who weeps with us, not only we have a God who has power over death and one day claims to pull us from that, but that the way that we can receive this is through belief in him.

A very simple thing. The bridge between death and life is belief. Over and over again, the word belief is raised in this passage.

Verse 15, For your sake I am glad I was not there so that you may believe. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?

He asked Martha. Looking into her eyes, Martha, do you believe this? He wasn't asking her to believe, do you believe that I can raise Lazarus? Do you have faith that I can raise Lazarus?

[28 : 45] He was saying, do you believe in me, not in what I can do? How often we have been misled in believing that we have to believe that God can heal for a healing to happen?

He never asks that. The only belief that he asks us to have is enough to hold his hand. Do you believe who I am, that I am the resurrection and the life? Verse 40, he says, I did not tell you that if you believed, did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?

And in verse 41, I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me. The bridge between death and life is belief.

For some of you that are sitting here, this talk on sorrowing is not a philosophical, intellectual exercise.

You are facing death in your own life. Some of you are facing destruction. some of you are facing what seems to be everything shifting and not knowing what's happening.

[29 : 56] Some of you are facing loss and deep pain. And maybe wonder, along with Martha, where is God? Maybe you're wondering, in my pain, I don't see God.

I've called him, but he hasn't come yet. Maybe you've just discovered that your marriage is almost at an end. Maybe the dream that you had for your entire life is being broken.

God seems distant. Your cry is that with Mary and Martha. Lord, if you'd been here, my brother would not have died. The story of Martha and Mary and Lazarus is the story that says God is there. Jesus is angry. Jesus is weeping with us. And it's a story that he will one day settle the accounts. And one day, there will be justice.

One day, the power of the prince of darkness will be forever broken. A picture that I've shared with some of you before is a temple that Nancy and I visited about 12 years ago in Kathmandu.

[31 : 07] It's a huge complex on the edge of the Bhagmati River dedicated to the god Shiv. Several acres in size, massive complex of temples.

And all through it are temples to Shiv. And the symbol of Shiv is the phallic symbol. So in the middle of all these temples is a huge phallic symbol. And on the walls, all around, very graphic symbols of sexuality.

This is a symbol in the worship of Shiv that if this fertility, sexuality is worshipped, then there will be blessing. In the middle of this temple, as you walk through it, you see what seems to be all the sick and the ill of Kathmandu.

There's tuberculosis. As a doctor, I could see illnesses I'd only read about sitting on the alleyways begging from the pilgrims that came. Flies hovering around terrible sores.

Many people, just rejected by their families, left because they had an illness that no one wanted to treat and were there because they would get a little bit of help. As Nancy and I went deeper into this temple complex, our hearts became heavier and heavier.

[32 : 17] We felt just the burden of suffering and pain. It was overwhelming. And as we were following directions, we ran around a corner and we came to a wall with a little door in it.

And inside that, door, we opened it up, there was something totally different. There was a long hallway about the length of this church, quite a bit narrower, and it was clean, well lit.

There were beds and there were people with different illnesses lying in those beds. And there were two women going around helping these people. These people, they looked peaceful.

These people that were in beds looked cared for. the women were wearing white soddies with a blue trim around the edge. And the idea where those people came from. These were women, they were Bengali women from Calcutta in the Sisters of Charity following Mother Teresa's dictum to go to the darkest place and care for people.

And they had opened up a refuge, a hospice for people that no one else cared for. For people that had been written off by their own community. and they were loving and caring for them.

[33 : 27] And amidst all these symbols of life, of sexuality, on the wall, what was the symbol? Any idea? The symbol of death. It was a cross.

The very place that you would think would be in progress, a place where life is happening is because of a cross. And I think this speaks very clearly to why we are here.

Thank you. We are in the midst of suffering. We are in the midst of pain. We live in a fallen world, a world that is increasingly dark.

But we have a sign, even as those Sisters of Charity have a sign. So Jesus' final question to Martha is the question to us. Do you believe? It's simply necessary for us to reach our hand and take in our hand the hand of Him who cries for us.

Do you believe you're needy and not capable of making yourself good? Do you believe yourself helpless in facing the evil within your own soul? If you do believe that, you've come to the right place.

[34 : 45] Jesus grieves with us. Jesus is angry at what hurts us. And Jesus has come to give us life.

Let us pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.