

PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“DEATH AS A PART OF LIFE”
April 10, 2011
John 11:1-45
ALL SERVICES

Jesus wept for Lazarus even though he knew he would be restored to life. Because of death's certainty and finality, we tend to think of death as the ultimate threat and the worst enemy. Most people do not have to live very long, however, to realize that there are a number of things worse than death. Physical death may come as an appropriate ending to our lives. Spiritual death has no such ambiguity.

In this passage we see both Jesus' power over death and his sorrow over the death of a friend. Jesus was one of us. He knew the pain of a broken heart. He could weep over news of a friend's death and at the prospect of his own death. Whatever makes us weep is not foreign to Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of John is a unique and many-splendored testimony to the reality and meaning of Jesus Christ. Matthew, Mark, and Luke have marked similarities and are called the “**synoptic**” Gospels, meaning “**seen together.**” John's Gospel is different. It is more theological in form, though grounded in the historical life of Jesus. It is sometimes called a “**book of signs,**” because it interprets events from Jesus' life in terms of their larger significance. John 9 tells of Jesus' healing of a blind man, but its larger concern is to present Jesus as the “**Light of life.**” John 11 tells of the raising of Lazarus, and bears witness to Jesus as “***the resurrection and the life.***”

Because death is universal and inevitable it must be faced by everyone. Still, different people, and different cultures, respond to death differently. Judeo-Christian cultures view death as the end of a person's life in this world, whatever is believed about eternity. Hindu cultures, believing in reincarnation, understand death somewhat differently. Since the mid-twentieth century American culture has been seen by many to be unable to face the reality of death. In 1974 Ernest Becker was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his book *The Denial of Death*, in which he

claimed that modern life is so paradoxical that most of us have learned ways of repressing our awareness of death's reality. He invited readers to face death realistically and cope with it by living for something that is greater than one's own life.

In Jesus' world, as in ours, death was a part of life. Jesus did not come to destroy physical death. All of Jesus' followers eventually died. Everyone who has ever lived has died, or will die. The Bible accepts the reality of death as a part of life. Ecclesiastes declares that there is *"a time to be born and a time to die."* (3:2) The New Testament book of Hebrews concurs: *"It is appointed to mortals once to die."* (9:27) Throughout the Bible death is real and serious. There is no automatic immortality of the soul to ease our thoughts of death. Biblically, the only hope in death is that God will resurrect us from the dead. Death is a part of life for all of us. Even Lazarus, who was brought back to life by Jesus, had to die again at some future time. Death is normal. Steward Alsop said that a dying person needs to die, as a sleepy person needs to sleep, and **"there comes a time when it is wrong, as well as useless, to resist."**

Jesus came to destroy, not death, but death's power. The power of death is fear. The fact of physical death and our awareness of it can be very threatening, and even overwhelming. When people have no adequate frame of reference for interpreting the meaning of life and death, the thought of death can become an all-consuming preoccupation. The spirit of death invades our hearts and minds, denying and destroying life. Today we frequently deal with **"quality of life"** issues. For health or medical reasons, a person's quality of life may be so drastically reduced that death would seem preferable. Quality of life is also diminished by lifestyle choices and destructive behavior. It is affected by unresolved guilt and shameless grief. Severely depressed or traumatized individuals may be in such extreme pain or utter misery that they plead or pray to die. There are many conditions in life that constitute "a fate worse than death." Norman Cousins noted: **"Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live."** The power of death is its ability to erode and even destroy all sense of life's meaning and worth.

The Apostle Paul wrote of death as one side of a conflict that is present inside us all. God's law struggles against the law of sin and death. *"Wretched man that I am," he wrote. "Who will deliver me from this body of death?"* (Romans 7:24) The powers of life and the powers of death are opposed, both within us and throughout the world. The powers of death render us spiritually dead, which is indeed a condition infinitely worse than physical death. On the other hand, the

reality of physical death can motivate us to live more fully. Oliver W. Holmes, Sr., wrote: **“Death tugs at my ear and says: ‘Live, I am coming.’”**

The raising of Lazarus, recorded only in John’s Gospel, is about much more than bringing a dead man back to life. It is an event that reveals Jesus’ relation to death, not only to Lazarus’ death, but to all death, even Jesus’ own death. In John’s Gospel the focus of the miracle is never on Lazarus. The focus remains on Jesus, not because he called attention to himself. At Lazarus’ tomb Jesus characteristically avoided even a hint of ostentation. What if they saw the miracle, but missed the meaning?

The meaning is that Christ himself is **“*the resurrection and the life.*”** In Christ’s own life and death we see the eternal triumph of life over death. Eternal life is not synonymous with heaven. Eternal life is the unique quality of life we find in Jesus Christ. We participate in Christ’s life here and now. And what we know in part will be fulfilled and fully known in the eternal realm. What happened to Lazarus is a **“*sign.*”** It is a sign that prefigures what awaits all who are in Christ.

Secular artists and poets often see more deeply than the rest of us into the significance of Jesus Christ. In 1919 American novelist Sherwood Anderson wrote **Winesburg, Ohio**. One of the characters says, **“Everyone in the world is Christ and they are all crucified.”** The statement has the ring of the New Testament in it. The Apostle Paul wrote to Corinth: **“For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.” (1 Co 15:22)**

**“Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand
For the world’s more full of weeping than you can understand.”**
(Refrain from “The Stolen Child,” W. B. Yeats)

Followers of Christ are called into situations where there is sorrow and weeping. The poet is right, there is more weeping in the world than anyone sees. Often the very best we can do is simply be present with a grieving person. Jesus said, **“In this world you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer. I have overcome the world.”**

If you can now believe that God has the power to raise you from the dead and restore you in God’s own time, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.