



# CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

## *Dying Before We Die The Fifth Sunday of Lent 3/21/2021*

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

Back I was in law school, myself and some of my friends used to frequent a local pub called The Alibi. And can we all just agree that is a great name for a pub, especially for aspiring lawyers? Anyway, one Friday night as we were walking up to The Alibi, I noticed that they had put up an enormous sign on their wall.

It was a giant black chalkboard and at the top were big letters “Before I die...” And there were all these blank lines below it, then lots of chalk. And the idea was for anyone passing by to stop and share something that they wanted to do. Or someone they wanted to become before they died. And I was in awe of all of the comments people had made. They had filled in all of the lines. They had added things in every margin, in every nook and cranny of that board. They had filled it all in with these just amazing outpouring of hopes and dreams and longings.

I discovered later that this little local pub was participating in a global public art project. Some 5,000 walls had been erected around the world in more than 78 countries. And its purpose was to encourage people to stop, stop for just a moment in the hustle and bustle of their daily lives and consider their mortality. And to reflect on what is most important in their life.

At this point in my own life, I have to admit I hadn't been doing much reflecting of my own. I was focused on getting through law school, passing the bar exam, starting my own law firm. I had my eye on this amazing sailboat, making my first million, all that stuff. I had never been to church, never heard of Ash Wednesday. And so this idea of considering your mortality, doing it at all much less in such a public way, it was really striking to me.

And so I stood there for a while reading what people had shared. And as you might expect, some of the comments were rather mundane sort of bucket list kinds of things. Before I die I want to learn to ski. I want to master French. Before I die, I want to travel the world. But some of them are truly profound. Before I die, I want to find true love. Before I die, I want to be accepted by my parents. Before I die, I want to make a difference in someone's life. Before I die, I want to find the courage to be myself.

This experience so many years ago came to my mind as I was reflecting on today's gospel, because Jesus is challenging us to ask a similar question, but one that I think digs just a bit deeper, one that perhaps gets to the root of so many of the longings that I read on that wall. In fact, if we were to create a global art project based on today's gospel, it might read in big letters at the top “Before I die, I need to die too.” Or “What do I need to die too...”

That's essentially the question I hear Jesus pointing us to today as this group of Greeks traveled to Jerusalem to see him. They are amongst the crowds descending on the city for the High Holy Days. And John seems to be painting a picture of Jesus's growing celebrity, having driven out the money changers from the temple and publicly challenging the religious establishment and their collusion with their Roman occupier, His reputation seems to be spreading.

And this arrival of this group of Greeks seems to signal that His movement is reaching a tipping point. Jesus knows it won't be long now until those two centers of power conspire to arrest and kill Him. And so He uses this moment to talk plainly about what it really means to follow Him, what it really means to see Him. And what does He say? Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life, lose it. And those who reject their life in this world, keep it.

John doesn't tell us if these Greeks made it past his entourage and actually end up seeing Jesus, but whether they did or not, it's a safe bet that that is not the message they were expecting to hear. After all, it's one that even his closest disciples have struggled with to completely understand throughout the gospels. As Jesus has sought to point out and point to the great reversal that the grain of God represents. A world where the lost are found, where the least are valued, where the last are put first, and where the left out are welcomed in with open arms.

And this reversal, the need to die in order to live is perhaps the most challenging paradox of them all. Though it should not come as a surprise. Considering that in story after story, Jesus has been trying to tell the disciples in one way or another, that to enter the kingdom of God, they would need to die to their old ways of being and to their old ways of seeing the world.

Their expectations about how the Messiah would overthrow the Romans by force had to die. Their assumptions and arguments about their place in the pecking order had to die. Their old understandings about who was in and who was out, who you could eat with and who you couldn't had to die. Their old divisions around nationalities, race, gender, and social class, all of it had to die if the kingdom of God were to take root. Dying to our old life, rising to new life is the path of Jesus. It is the rhythm of Holy Week and as Jesus underscores, it's not just His path. It's for our sake as well. As Christians, it is the rhythm of our lives.

As we here get ready to open our doors once more, as we get ready for the crowds from places far and wide to descend upon us, eager to see Jesus after our long exile, let us also pause and ask, "What do we need to die to for the resurrection to take hold within us?" Do we need to die to our fears and judgments of those who think differently or watch that other cable news channel? Do we need to die to our fruitless yet never ending efforts to find happiness in the latest and the greatest, the biggest and the fastest?

Do we need to die to our perfectionism and our need to find value in our salaries and our titles and in the approval of others? Do we need to die to our puffed up identities and our

false avatars we project on Facebook and our habit of confusing what we do with who we are? Do we need to die to our busy-ness in our long hours, we work that keep us from our kids? Do we need to die to our pride, our stubbornness, our old resentments that keep us from repairing our broken relationships? Those are just some of the things on my list. What's on yours? What do you need to let go of so that the life that God wants for you can take root? Before coming to see Jesus, this Easter, perhaps we too should pause amidst the hustle and bustle of our daily life and consider what we need to die to so that Jesus might be seen through us.

And if you need any confirmation that we spend way too much time, too much energy fighting and arguing and striving over all the wrong things. If you need any more motivation to exit our consumer culture and the rat race that propels it, think back to a funeral you might've attended. I have presided at enough of them by now that I've started to notice a distinct pattern. And that is when your friends and families, when they get up and stand behind that podium to celebrate your life, they don't talk about your credentials or your degrees. They don't mention your salary or how high up the corporate ladder you climbed. They don't talk about the cars you drove or the homes you own. They don't recount the shows you binge watched on Netflix or the hours you spent on Facebook. They don't talk about your politics or the arguments you won. They don't celebrate the feuds you had or the resentments you harbored.

No. What they always end up spending their time on, what they always end up talking about are all the ways that you were there for them, all the ways you gave your life away to them. They talk about the ways you were there when they needed a friend. They talk about the times you listened when they needed to be heard. The times you showed up when they thought that they would be alone, the times you helped them feel valued and seen when they felt invisible, the times you made room for them at your table, when they thought they would be left out. The times you lifted them up when the world had told them they had failed.

And by the way, the stories they tell, they're not about big grandiose moments. They're almost always small ones. The soccer game you made it to, the bad jokes you took the time to tell, the weekly phone calls you never failed to make, the birthdays you never missed, the long walks when you listened and the nights you spent at their bedside. Those are the moments they remember, because those are the true fruit of our lives. They are the fruit we can bear when we let all that other stuff just die.

Jesus is reminding us that the resurrection we celebrate on Easter, isn't an event to attend, but a conscious choice we can make every day when we say no to the distractions and temptations of this life and say yes to the relationships of our eternal one. If this sounds like a burden, if this sounds like a lot of hard work or some kind of guilt trip, I hope it doesn't surprise you to hear it's actually just the reverse. You see all that stuff we get caught up in life, as you probably know, all that score-keeping we do, all the pressure we put on ourselves and on our children to succeed. All the judging we do that keeps our guard up, all this focus on labels and false identities, it is an enormous burden to carry.

Just look at the amount of medication and self-medication we take to try to cope. And just look at the teen suicide rates when they no longer can. Look at the stress we carry, the debts we take on, the broken relationships we leave in our wake, and the tragedies that result when we pit one group against another. That's what Jesus wants to free us from. That's what the Cross can liberate us from. And that's good news. In fact, that's probably some of the best news I've heard in a while.

So what do you need to reject, to live a life worth remembering? What do you need to die to so that you can truly live?

Amen.