



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There is a movie called *The Sixth Sense*. It was made in 1999. And there's this iconic line said by a child: "I see dead people." Now I do not see dead people, but I spend a lot of my time thinking about death. Professionally, I work with deaths on a regular basis. I find out when you're fighting illnesses and sometimes fighting for your life. I'm acutely aware of how close to death each one of you gets.

I've been at the deathbed of many people watching death overtake him. I walk with you as you deal with the death of your loved one. I help put together all the funerals here at the church. I have poured ashes into graves and covered them with dirt, and buried people. I do grief work with you and lots of others, helping people understand the acute pain that they are experiencing because of the finality of death.

I deal with death a lot professionally, but personally, I've always had this natural inclination to think about death every day. I am constantly aware of the presence of death. I have no idea if this is normal or not. But it's my normal. I can feel the power of death lurking around the corner. I can see it in the shadows. I see it surrounding all of us. Sometimes I can smell it, but I can always sense its power of decay and destruction. Death's ability to erase life, to make someone who is so present be utterly absent. Its insistence on stealing life from the living. I never forget about death. We are all so fragile. We are just made of flesh and blood and nothing else, and we are so easily extinguished.

Now, having this macabre tendency means two things for me. First, I can take no one for granted. I am really amazed. I am stunned, really, that I get to see you, that you are here and you're alive, because tomorrow you may not be. I remember there was one Christmas Eve several years ago that I had made plans, finally, to hang out with a parishioner named Harold. Harold and I had the best discussions during coffee hour. He was an economist working at Lawrence Tech and he and I would argue and have fun over all kinds of weird economist things.

And so finally, I said, during Christmas Eve, Harold, we're going to have lunch together, but I'm going on vacation, so when I get back from vacation, let's enjoy each other. And so we made a date for January 2nd when I got back. And on December 29th, he was shoveling snow from his driveway, he slipped, he hit his head, and he died. So I've come to the conclusion that if I get to see you face to

face today, it is an utter gift from God and I am not going to waste it. I am in awe of you being here because death is in the shadows waiting to devour you. Are you that way every time that you witness someone in the real flesh and blood? Does it amaze you?

The second effect that this concentrating on death has had on my life is it makes me devour Bible readings like the ones for today. These are spectacular stories from our scriptures, and the power of them cannot be overstated. These readings, they're antidotes for a life filled with death. They claim that death is not as final as it wishes to be. In both of these stories, the Valley of Dry Bones and the Raising of Lazarus, death has already done its work. Death won the first round. In one case for four days. In another case, for decades.

People have died and the irreversibility of death is not denied by God, it is not denied by Jesus. But these stories, to mix metaphors, take my breath away because they tell us there is a second round for our bodies, for our minds, for our souls. The God who gives us life the first time will come again and give us life again after we die.

And honestly, that is why I am a Christian. I appreciate the other gifts of our faith, don't get me wrong. I love the beautiful mandate of a life that's supposed to be filled and shaped and guided by love. And I am super grateful to have it impressed on me over and over again how important it is to live in community with people who aren't related to me, who don't think like me, who don't look like me, so that I can experience the fullness of life and practice forgiveness and mercy and generosity through this beautiful and flawed institution known as the Church.

But I am a Christian because Jesus Christ is the resurrection, and Jesus Christ has conquered death once and for all, and for all of us, so that when we die, we will be able to live again. Our brittle and dry and cremated bones will take form and they'll rattle together again to make once more our legs, our torsos, our hands, our face, and we're going to be covered with muscle and sinew again. And God will robe our bodies again with beautiful skin of so many colors, and we will live after we die. Let me say that again. We will live after we die. That is what happened in that Valley of Dry Bones. That is what happened to Lazarus. That is what happened to Jesus, and that is what will happen to us.

I spend a lot of time thinking about death, but I spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about the hope that we have in Jesus Christ. What does hope in the resurrection mean for us as we live our daily lives? The prophet Ezekiel and Lazarus's sisters, Mary and Martha, helped me understand two unique characteristics about this hope in the midst of death. The characteristics are humility and patience. First, hope in the resurrection, it makes you humble. It makes you humble because you are utterly dependent on God.

When Ezekiel went to that Valley of Dry Bones, did you notice he had no idea what to do? The Lord had to tell him step by step how to do things, and frankly, if you were put in a valley of dry bones, you aren't going to know what to do either. You need the Maker of Heaven and Earth and the Creator of Life to bring life into those ashes and put them bone by bone together so that they can breathe again. And Mary and Martha, they didn't know what to do either. They were in the same boat. They were utterly helpless. They knew that if Jesus didn't show up, their brother had no chance of life. That is humbling.

One of the great ways to cultivate your own humility is coming up. It's to practice Holy Week, that week when we walk with Jesus to the Cross and to His death. And it's humbling because there is nothing that you can do except watch Jesus. Now, not surprisingly, I am going to recommend and ask that you come every single day of Holy Week. I want you to come on Palm Sunday and experience the wonderful Hosanna and the palms, and then the passion gospel that tells the whole story, and then every night at 7:00 PM Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday. Every night. And I think if you do that, you're going to find that you're going to become more and more humble. But even more importantly, your hope in Jesus will become more and more strong because you see again what God will do for you. God will undergo death to forever change it.

Now, second, with that beautiful hope that is humble, hand in hand with that goes some patience. Because it's clear to anyone who's lost a loved one that we need the resurrection. We need Jesus. But what's not clear is why we have to wait. What if you really could see dead people, like right now? What if the dead were alive and you could reach out to them and hold them and hug them and have lunch with them. But those bones in that valley, they were bone dry because they had been there a long, long, long time. And Lazarus, he was in the grave long enough to cause a stench of rotting flesh. This hope in Jesus requires us to develop a deep and deliberate patience.

And when do you develop this patience? Well, theologian Brian McLaren said that you have three different kinds of seasons in your life. You have a season of simplicity, you have a season of complexity, and then you have a season of perplexity. So seasons of simplicity are when things work as they expected to work. When you pray and you do the right thing and good things happen, and that's beautiful. And then the seasons of complexity are when things get a little bit more complicated and you have to endure trials and things require a little bit more for you to make it through, and you endure to get to the finish line on the other side, and that's complexity.

But the season of perplexity is when you've done everything right. You've done everything you could. You've prayed as hard as you know how, and still things don't go well. People die. When the slaves in the United States sang spirituals,

they were in a season of perplexity. Nothing made sense to them. They were made in the image of God, and yet they were dehumanized. They were made to be free in Christ, and yet they were shackled, so they sang. They sang of a time when they would be free to live and be loved, of what they could imagine what it'd be like with every tear wiped away, with death and mourning and crying and pain being no more. And they also sang of the difficulties of this world and how they wished they could fly away from them.

It was a time of deep perplexity for them, and dare I say, for all Christians, slave or free. But in that perplexity, hope was born. And they hoped with abandon that God would rescue them from their plight, and their hope was kept alive by a deep patience, knowing that God would do what God promised to do, but probably not in their lifetime. And so they sang. They sang to grow their patience.

I got a crown up in the kingdom
Ain't that good news?
I got a robe up in the kingdom
Ain't that good news?

And they sang to instill hope in their children.

Walk together children
Don't you get weary
There's a great camp meeting
In the Promised Land

And they sang to believe in the hope of life after death.

Swing low, sweet chariot
Comin' for to carry me home

They endured the perplexity of their lives by having an enormously patient hope in Jesus Christ who would give them life again. May you develop a hope in the resurrection. May humility shape your life as you accept and depend on God. And may you not despair since you and I do not see dead people yet, but may you be like a widow from this congregation who, when she saw her husband in the coffin and as they were closing the casket, she said to the body, see you again.

Amen.