

## *Overcoming the Fear of Death*

Palm Sunday Weekend – March 19/20, 2005

### Sermon Background Study

“For God did not give us a spirit of fear,  
but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” (2 Timothy 1:7)

*John 12:12-15 (NRSV)*

<sup>12</sup>The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup>So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!”

<sup>14</sup>Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

<sup>15</sup>“Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.

Look, your king is coming,  
sitting on a donkey’s colt!”

*Mark 14:32-36 (NRSV)*

<sup>32</sup>They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” <sup>33</sup>He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. <sup>34</sup>And he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.” <sup>35</sup>And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. <sup>36</sup>He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.”

*Today, we gather to celebrate Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem in the midst of a palm-waving crowd.*

*But we also remember Jesus’ approaching death on a cross, as we seek to make God’s victory over death and the fear of death, our own.*

Of all God’s creatures, we are the only ones who contemplate death. Not only do we contemplate it, we obsess about it. I remember a scene from the movie *Moonstruck*. When asked why her husband chases after younger women, the wife replies that he fears death. In my thesaurus of quotations, there are 136 entries on death. What could I possibly write about death in the space of this brief study that would be helpful to anyone? Perhaps a brief review of the Bible’s perspective on death is the best place to start.

#### *Biblical perspectives on death*

In the opening chapters of Genesis, God creates humans in his own image, giving them a beautiful garden in which to live and work. God warns them not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But they do anyway and the consequences are tragic. God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” (Genesis 3:22). Because Adam and Eve might grasp immortality for themselves, God banishes them from the garden; they are sent into exile. Thus, the humans were created mortal; death was a part of God’s created order. The exile from the garden precluded the possibility of immortality. *Caution* – don’t read more into this story than is here. There is

#### Jerusalem at Passover

Ancient Jerusalem was a sprawling city with a population of 60,000 or so. But at festival time, the city’s population would swell to nearly 200,000! And no festival was bigger or more well-attended than Passover.

In Jesus’ day, Passover presented a real problem for the Roman occupiers. Not only was the city stuffed with throngs of Jews who resented the Roman occupiers as easily as they breathed, Passover itself was emotionally charged. After all, Passover celebrated the Exodus from Egypt, when God had saved the Israelites from their Egyptian oppressors. It certainly didn’t take much imagination to lump the hated Romans in with Pharaoh. The typical Jew on the streets of Jerusalem anxiously awaited the day when God would free them from the Romans just as he had freed them from Egypt. God had saved them then; God would save them now.

Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea, did not usually stay in Jerusalem, preferring the Roman-built city of Caesarea on the Mediterranean. Nonetheless, Pilate would come to Jerusalem each year for the duration of Passover to oversee personally the peace-keeping. Pilate would make his headquarters in the Antonia Fortress, overlooking the great temple and its expansive courtyards. Roman guards would stand atop the fortress walls as they kept a nervous eye on the crowds below.

nothing in the Genesis story about the nature of death, any sort of after-life, nor anything about resurrection. All we are told is that the humans' disobedience, their sin, results in their exile from the garden and that so long as they are in exile, they cannot live forever.

Now, let's fast forward to the time of Jesus. The people of the ancient world knew that the dead stayed dead. For them, if there was any sort of after-life, it was a shadowy existence and generally unpleasant. And they certainly knew that there was no such thing as resurrection.<sup>1</sup> The answer to Job's question, "If mortals die, will they live again?" (14:14) was an emphatic "No!" Yet, among the ancients, the Jews told a different story. By Jesus' day, most Jews did believe in the resurrection of the dead, in death's undoing. If sin had brought banishment from the garden and foreclosed the possibility of living forever, the Jews' expectation was that God would bring them back from exile so that they might live forever in a right and good relationship with God and one another. In essence, upon the coming of God's kingdom, God's people would eat of the tree of life.

After Jesus' resurrection, his followers proclaimed to everyone who would listen that the resurrection of the dead had begun. To the Jews, this claim was puzzling at best because their expectation was that everyone would be raised at the same time. To the non-Jews, the Christians were claiming something that everyone knew simply didn't happen! But for the Christians, Jesus' resurrection meant that death had been undone. Death's defeat meant the exile from the garden had ended which meant sin had been defeated as well, for it was sin that had led to the exile in the first place. Death was now no more than one more stage on our way to an embodied eternity with God and one another.<sup>2</sup>

#### A Royal Reception

Throughout his public ministry, Jesus used powerful and evocative symbols to make his own claim to Messiahship. The Gospel accounts of Palm Sunday are laden with these symbols.

Four hundred years before Jesus, the prophet of Zechariah told about God's king of peace, who would come to Jerusalem victorious and triumphant, but riding on a humble colt (Zech 9:9). Jesus used this imagery and entered Jerusalem on a colt.

We may have trouble seeing Jesus' arrival at Jerusalem as the coming of a king, but his followers certainly didn't. They went outside the city walls to escort him inside, for that was the custom with returning kings. They shouted "Hosanna!" meaning "save us." They hailed him as the "Son of David." They chanted phrases from Psalm 118, a royal psalm offering thanks for victory over Israel's oppressors. As had been done at the anointing of King Jehu (2 Kings 9:11-13), they laid out cloaks in front of Jesus. They even waved palm branches, which were symbols of abundance and thanks. All this was a welcome fit for a king.

#### *The fear of death*

And so we are back to our fear of death. Simply put, why do Christians, the people of the resurrection, fear death? Since fear is the opposite of faith, does our fear of death betray a lack of trust in God and God's promises? Perhaps, but before you answer too quickly, consider Jesus in Gethsemane. Jesus knows that he will soon be arrested and found guilty. And he knows the penalty that will be exacted - his torture and death on a Roman cross. Jesus prays mightily for another way forward. In Luke's account, Jesus sweats drops of blood in his anguish and an angel from heaven strengthens him. Even Jesus is not immune to fear. Does Jesus not trust God? There are no simple answers to such questions.

Late in his life, Kenneth Kranzer, a long-time professor of theology at Wheaton, observed that perhaps Christians' fear of death is due in part to our fear of heaven - our fear that it will be too boring! In a sermon, C.S. Lewis put it this way, "We are halfhearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday by the sea." Perhaps our fear of death would be lessened if we understood a little better all that God means by the promise of "heaven." Too often, we fail to connect our proclamation of resurrection with our notions of heaven, failing to grasp the joyful physicality of the life to come. Imagine for yourself the very best that this life has to offer and recognize that it is only a pale reflection of what lies ahead. Somehow, we must learn to cherish this life while we joyfully await the next.

<sup>1</sup>For example, in Homer's *Iliad*, after killing King Priam's son, Achilles tells the grief-stricken king, "Nothing will come of sorrowing for your son, nor will you raise him up (*anastasis*, resurrect) before you die." The meaning of "raise him up" was plain, it was the reversal or undoing of death. This Greek word for "resurrection," *anastasis*, was the word Paul and the other NT writers used to describe Jesus' "undoing of death" after his crucifixion.

<sup>2</sup>I've done my best to compress a lot of theology into a few paragraphs. In my spring class, *The Spirit-filled Life*, we will have more time to unpack all this. The first class meeting will be on Mon. evening, March 28. Register at [www.standrewcl.org](http://www.standrewcl.org).

## Daily Bible Readings

*(some more on death and what comes after)*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Genesis 3 The story of Adam and Eve's disobedience and the resulting exile from the Garden of Eden.</p>	<p>Day 2 Psalm 88 esp. vv. 3-7 and 10-12 One of many OT depictions of death that are not much different from Homer's.</p>
<p>Day 3 Daniel 12 This passage, esp. vv. 2-3, was central to the development of the Jewish belief in the bodily resurrection of the dead.</p>	<p>Day 4 John 11 The story of Lazarus' death and return from death. When Jesus raises Lazarus, it is a resuscitation not resurrection. Lazarus is brought back from death (like from an operating table) but will still go on to die again (hopefully at a ripe old age!). Death has not been defeated, just postponed.</p>
<p>Day 5 Philippians 1:18b-26 Paul wishes "to depart and be with Christ" but knows that his remaining "in the flesh" is necessary for the sake of his work in the Christian community. In other words, he is ready to die but he knows that his work is not done.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

## Sermon Notes

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### **Spring Bible Academy info and registration is on-line! To learn more and to register, simply go to [www.standrewccl.org](http://www.standrewccl.org)**

The Spring Bible Academy brochure is now out. We hope that you will sign up for a class. Here are a few comments from people who attended the just-completed winter session:

- “The class stimulated much thought and discussion around the dinner table! Great stuff.”
- “This class is just what I needed. It has helped me to deepen my faith and to understand Jesus better.”
- “I highly recommend these classes as I’ve learned more from them than I have anywhere else. I often recommend the classes to my friends and family.”
- “This class makes me feel like I really belong to St. Andrew. This is such a great group and my week gets off to such a great start. I feel warm and refreshed every time we meet.”
- “These classes are such a source of spiritual growth.”

Most classes will begin the week March 28. Please register early.

Please note that there is a typo in the Bible Academy brochure. Scott Engle’s Tuesday evening class, *Acts: A new Spirit and a New World*, is not a class for night-owls! We will gather at 6:45 pm. Class will be from 7:00 to 8:30.

#### **March Book Recommendation**

*Your God Is Too Small: A guide for believers and skeptics alike*, by J.B. Phillips

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul reflects on life and death, understanding the nature of the choice:

“Life versus even more life! I can’t lose. As long as I’m alive in this body, there is good work for me to do. If I had to choose right now, I hardly know which I’d choose. Hard choice! The desire to break camp here and be with Christ is powerful. Some days I can think of nothing better. But most days, because of what you are going through, I am sure that it’s better for me to stick it out here. So I plan to be around awhile, companion to you as your growth and joy in this life of trusting God continues.”

from Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase, *The Message*

At least at this point in his life, Paul certainly did not fear death. He understands that his choice is not really so much between “life and death” as between “life and more life.” What a perspective! We can pray that it would be our own.

Why do you think we fear death? Is it death itself or is it the effect our death would have on our loved ones? Is it a lack of confidence that what we proclaim to be true, is actually true? Is it a fear that heaven will be boring? Do you think that a fear of death is simply hard-wired into us?

What keeps us from sharing Paul’s perspective? How could we go about making his outlook our own? Where would we begin? Perhaps you’ve known people who saw the choice as life v. more life. You might tell some of their stories. Is there a common factor that all these people shared in common?