

“I am the Resurrection and the Life: Trust in the Face of Mystery”¹

March 25, 2012

I

“ ‘Very truly, I tell you, 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 ... and when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.’ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.”

Now this reading in John this morning is a complicated thing ... with a pastiche of pieces that don't really fit easily together. But basically, I think this is a dark Gospel passage ... a dark passage set within a longer, dark framework. And the framework is a scaffolding signifying death – Jesus' death on the cross, and our own death to come as followers of Christ.

But that scaffolding of the cross is also a sign of life, a sign of hope, a sign of salvation promised by God in his eternal covenant. 'Cause Jeremiah writes, “ ‘... for I will forgive their iniquities,’ says the Lord, ‘and remember their sin no more.’ ”

So let's put this all into a bigger frame than this morning's readings. And talk about death in the process.

See, shortly before this scene in John – before this one but I think of a piece with it – is the raising of Lazarus from the grave.

Now you remember the raising of Lazarus, don't you? I mean, even if you're not a Bible reader particularly, you know the story. How Jesus was warned that His friend was gravely ill and that he should come to heal him. And how Jesus still lingered where He was, staying put 'til it was too late to save Lazarus from his last breath. And then Jesus came to Lazarus' tomb ... anguished at the death of His friend ... weeping. And then Jesus prayed to God with all His might ... knowing God's power to save, knowing He could raise Lazarus as a sign – a sign of life beyond death, a sign of God's faithful covenant with His creatures, a sign, a pre-

figuring of Jesus' own victory over the grave, a sign of God's "no" to the darkness of death in the end.

So I do think that's of a larger piece with today's reading. And the topic ... unfortunately ... or maybe fortunately ... is death.

II

All right, what can we make of all this?

'Cause as I just said, I think today's scene – and in fact the last few scenes in John – are about death. But I think they're also about life in the face of death. They're about dying and they're about last things. And these scenes are about resurrection and they're about eternal life. So they're basically about hope ... and they're about trust ... in some unimaginable life beyond the grave.

In one of Frederick Buechner's later books, *The Eyes of the Heart*, he records a wonderful conversation he has in his mind's eye with his long dead grandmother Naya. She sits across from him in his study, smoking a cigarette and knitting – apparently she was quite a character – a piece of work in her day!

And in this scene, Buechner says to Naya, "It's not my ultimate destination that preoccupies me at this point, so much as it's the nature of the departure – that great deep-throated blast of the ocean liner as she starts to pull away from the pier, the wheeling gulls overhead, the first glimpse, out beyond Elis Island and the Statue of Liberty, that first glimpse of the open sea ... it's that pushing off that preoccupies me."

So his grandmother Naya sits there knitting a sock. And Buechner says, "You've already set sail. What can you tell me about it?"

She pauses over her knitting and says, "When someone once asked your uncle Jim if some friend or other had passed away, Jim answered in his own fashion by saying, 'Passed away? Good God, he's dead!' "

She says, "I know just how he felt. I always thought 'passed away' was a silly way of putting it." She pauses and then she says, "actually ... it's the world that passes away.

"I remember I was in that little hospital room ... and your mother and others were coming and going and then ...I could feel the world gradually slowing down more and more ... until one night, after that charming nurse – whose name I regret

to say I've forgotten – she turned out the light and was getting ready to go home. And I realized then. . .that the world was finally slowing down enough for me to get off. And that's just what I proceeded to do. It was rather like getting off a streetcar ... a trolley before it's quite come to a stop – a little jolt when my foot first struck the pavement. And then the world clanged its bell and went rattling off down the tracks without me.”

She says, “But you know, I felt nothing so much as astonishment. No sadness, really. I'd lived so many years by then that I was sure the only thing that could ever finish me off would be a violent death of some kind – a smash-up on that corkscrew road to Asheville maybe.

“So then when it finally happened right there in that little bed ... with the night light on ... and that nice nurse standing by, nothing could have been more peaceful...and I was astonished.”

So, Buechner.

Well, of course, we all finally die, don't we. So Lazarus in the tomb is bound ... even once out of the tomb ... finally ... sometime later ... bound again. And you and I are also bound. So I think death jerks you around, determines what you do, fills you with fear. We build; we achieve; we accumulate and acquire. But everything fades. Everything withers, decays, dies.

And I think that somber fact accounts for much of what you and I do in life. You build your fragile bridges over this great abyss. But you cannot finally deny it. So I do think death is the darkest mystery that you and I face. And as much as you pray for healing and long life, finally there is no power that steps in to protect you from that end.

So like Jesus, you weep with the enormity of your sadness and your anger at it. And of course you'd give anything to know exactly what lies beyond that pavement once you step off that trolley and the world rattles on down the tracks without you.

III

My Dad died just after Labor Day in 2001 ... a few days before 9/11 in fact. He was so sick and there was nothing medically to be done. Yet still I wanted to hang onto him. And when he was gone ... stepped off of grandmother Naya's

trolley ... into some other place where I'm not ... there's now this cavernous black hole I cannot peer into. So also with Leon's and my Mom's death in 2010.

But I do trust that they're there ... somewhere ... somehow ... waiting for me to join them and all the others. But in the meantime, here I am. I'm still on that trolley ... going somewhere.

'Cause as someone's said, we step off that trolley one by one by designation. And so when you and I approach our own turn, I suppose we'll try to make some sense out of it. And maybe my first question will be "why? Why me, why now, why this?" As if, you know, as if I could just be given one good reason, then it would be O.K. ... Maybe a reason would give me some sense of control. As if one good reason might give me some sense that I could maybe give a counter argument ... if I could just know that reason. Maybe I could give a *better* reason why it shouldn't be now. Why it shouldn't be me. Why it shouldn't be this.

So then maybe you pray, "Lord, give me something more than just asking me to believe ... believe ... what?"

"That all will be well."

"Well how, exactly, will all be well?"

"It will be well. Trust me."

"Well, will I still be me? Will they be them?"

"It'll be all right. It really will be all right."

"Well please God, give me something I can work with here, something I can hold onto. Don't just ask me to step off that trolley into the unknown."

See, Buechner says this is the ancient cry of the heart. Why me? Why this? Don't you care God that I suffer? Give me something, God, to hang onto. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Well, someone's said that maybe the hardest choice of all is to *decide* to trust, to *decide* to step out into that unknown, to *decide* to give up control of the journey you're on. But Jesus does ask you and me ... in the end ... to do just that ... to trust.

He says to us this morning, "When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself." And elsewhere, He says, "I am the resurrection and the life. You who

believe in me, even though you die, will live; And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.”

See, I believe these are the words of God who, through Jesus, says, “Trust me. It’ll be all right.” Like a father who comforts his child who wakes in the middle of the dark night. “There. There. It’ll be all right.”

Of course, no one’s come back to assure you and me that what we hope for is true. Or have they? Has Someone come back? Well, maybe it all depends on what you believe ... what you believe ... and who you believe in the end. ‘Cause see ... there was Lazarus’ friend Jesus – Jesus who struggled with his own dying with fear and prayers for sparing. But despite all His anguish He was willing to let go – to let go and step out into mystery, clinging to his Father in prayer with his last breath. “Father into your hands ...”

Well now someone said they saw Him later ... and that He told them not to be afraid. “Fear not,” he says.

See, He’d made that journey. And it was going to be all right.

So finally ... I guess it all depends on who you believe. I guess it all depends on whether, when it’s your turn, you can let go of the world slipping away from you ... let go and step out into that God-given mystery of whatever comes next.

“I am the resurrection and the life. And whoever lives and believes in me ...”

Believe me.

It will be ... all right.

Amen.

1. Resources used: Frederick Buechner’s *The Eyes of the Heart; John* by Gerard Sloyan (Interpretation series); *Synthesis* for March 25th; *Connect! Uniting Word & World*, Fifth Sunday of Lent; *Lectionary Homiletics*.