



## SUNDAY SERMON

# How Will You Die?

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*I am Resurrection and I am Life, says the Lord.  
Whoever has faith in me shall have life,  
even though he die.  
And everyone who has life,  
and has committed himself to me in faith,  
shall not die for ever.*

*As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives  
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth.  
After my awaking, he will raise me up;  
and in my body I shall see God.  
I myself shall see, and my eyes behold him  
who is my friend and not a stranger.*

*For none of us has life in himself,  
and none becomes his own master when he dies.  
For if we have life, we are alive in the Lord,  
and if we die, we die in the Lord.  
So, then, whether we live or die,  
we are the Lord's possession.*

*Happy from now on  
are those who die in the Lord!  
So it is, says the Spirit,  
for they rest from their labors.*

### DATE

The Sunday after All Saints  
Sun., Nov. 6, 2016

### PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

### READINGS

Daniel 7:1-3,15-18  
Psalm 149  
Ephesians 1:11-23  
Luke 6:20-31

One day, a day not yet known to me, these anthems shall be read at the beginning of my burial service. If you are buried from the church and if you wish, these anthems may be read at the beginning of your burial service.

These particular anthems have been sung or said in the burial rite of the church since the early 1500's. The first stanza—"I am Resurrection and I am Life..."—is from the Gospel of John; the words of Jesus to Martha spoken just before Jesus raised Martha's brother Lazarus from the dead; "whoever has faith in me," he told her, "shall not die for ever."

The second—"I know that my Redeemer lives..."—are words spoken by Job moments after he is told that his children have died, spoken in a season of absolute desolation. Defiantly, Job affirms, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." And from I Timothy: "We brought nothing into the world; we can take nothing out of it."

Few things capture our attention and remind or awaken us to the fleeting poignancy of life like the burial of the dead. We each know that one day we will die. I know that one day I will die. Knowing that truth, we do not look too closely. In truth, we actively, determinedly look elsewhere, anywhere else. We focus not on death, but on life. We dream and hope. We create and procreate. We give our attention to and we admire those who are thriving, growing, prospering, while we shy away from those who are waning, retreating, ending, decaying, and we fear it in ourselves.

*Continued*

So when someone dies we are brought up short, reminded of our own mortality, reminded that much as we busy ourselves with life and love and dreams and work and friends, we, too, shall tremble and fall as the leaves on the trees of autumn. And when we hear those anthems proclaimed, resounding as thunder, we attend deeply to the affirmation of our faith: “if we have life, we are alive in the Lord, and if we die, we die in the Lord.” Our life is in God, and our life ends in God. Perhaps we wonder, what does this mean? Where will I be when I am not here in my body? Who will I be when I am not me in my body?

On the feast of All Saints’ we envision a heavenly host: of all who have gone before, and all who are yet to come. As the arc of our mortal lives ends in Christ, that arc begins in Christ; indeed it begins today with the very newest of Christians, as the Holy Spirit is poured out upon Jasper Christopher, Elisabeth Melia, and Daphne Rensen with the words: “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” And all God’s people proclaim: “Amen!”

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord; “the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” Between our beginning and our ending, in the arc of our mortal lives, we have ... this life, this moment, but the twinkling of an eye, and in it, the tumult and the grace of discovery and joy, love and loss, fear and hope, seasons of increase and decrease, of consolation and desolation, of blessings and woes.

There are three things I invite you to consider today. The first is how you will die. We do not know the day or the hour. We do not know about unforeseen circumstances—diagnoses or accidents. When asked how we would like to die, most of us will say that they we would like to go to sleep one night in our own bed and not wake up, or that we hope it happens quickly, or that we hope to be able to say good-bye to those whom we love.

There is much over which we have no say, there is some over which we can have a say, but in order to have a say in our own dying we need to face it, acknowledge it, think about it; we need to be intentional, deliberate, and we need to communicate our hopes to others. That does not sound like too much to ask, but most of us avoid it.

As you leave worship this morning, the ushers will give you a copy of a document called Five Wishes. This is a gift for you—from me, from your church. There is one copy for each person age sixteen and up. It is an advance directive with a series of questions to help you think about and articulate how you would like to die. I recommend that you work through it first on your own, but before completing the form, review it with your spouse, partner, close friend, or children. When duly signed and witnessed, it has legal standing. If you find yourself hesitating or unsure or feeling alone, please know that I—or Kate, Jason or one of our Stephen Ministers—would consider it an honor to meet and speak with you privately.

If you think, as most of us do, that you have a good many years left and you can do this later, recognize that as a natural voice of denial, overrule that voice, and do the exercise anyway. I am not old; I am not ill, or too creaky. Two years ago, out of the blue, two of my closest friends, my age, were each diagnosed with very aggressive diseases and died. It is not for us to know the hour. And I can assure you from my own experience and the stories of others that this exercise will bring you a surprising sense of fulfillment and wholeness.

The second thing I invite you to consider is how you will live—today, this week, in this political climate, in the coming season. My friend Mark Beckwith, Bishop of Newark, suggests we start with the exchange of the Peace—that simple gesture intended to be an act of reconciliation, a visible witness to the commitment we make as Christians, that whatever has separated us can be brought back together in the reconciling love of Christ. The exchange of the Peace doesn’t smooth over difference (thank God, because we need to honor our difference), but it can heal division. Let’s commit ourselves to being the embodiment of the peace we seek in our hearts and for this nation. In the aftermath of the election our psyches will no doubt be operating on full throttle, tempted with righteousness (“my candidate won, so I’m right”) or recrimination (“my candidate lost, so you’re wrong”).

Don’t fall for it. We are meant to walk together, to work together, to listen deeply, celebrate our differences, reconcile our divisions; to share this fragile earth our island home. Reaching out to those we fear, oppose or despise can seem too hard for us. Seek to put aside your own need and be open. Allow the Spirit of Christ within you to embrace the Christ in the other.

Finally, I invite you to consider a saint, a saint who may be a saint only to you. A saint is one through whom the light of Christ shines, someone in whose life we see or saw the light of Christ. I am thinking today of two living saints, saints for me: my Mum and Dad. As the years add up and the leaves turn to brown, they are looking at their dying—not easily, but looking all the same. William Sloane Coffin observed that “Nature gets more interesting as you get nearer to joining it.” Along the way, Mum and Dad have had their share of highs and lows, sometimes plagued by demons, sometimes risen to heights of generosity, courage and grace. They have tried to live out their faith through the actions of their lives. To me they are not saints because they are perfect; they are saints because they have shone a light on my path, have helped me see what it is to be faithful. Who is a saint in your life? How will you show your gratitude for their witness?

I close with words of John Donne. Let us pray.

*Bring us, O Lord God, at our last awakening into the house and gate of heav'n  
to enter into that gate and dwell in that house,  
where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light;  
no noise nor silence, but one equal music;  
no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession;  
no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity;  
in the habitation of thy glory and dominion, world without end. Amen.*