



## SUNDAY SERMON

# A Good Funeral

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Precious Lord, take my hand,  
lead me on, let me stand.  
Take my hand, precious Lord,  
lead me home.

I went to a funeral not long ago. Have you been to a funeral recently? I really appreciate a good funeral – although that’s not how I’d say it if I’ve been close to the person who died. They vary, of course, depending on our relationship with the deceased. Completely different if we’re there in support for a colleague, or if it’s our best friend, or our own Dad perhaps.

Regardless our relationship, a funeral awakens us to truths we know yet regularly forget: the fragility of life, the nearness of death – death always here beside us, yet mostly we do not notice.

I really appreciate a good funeral because as I listen to the eulogies and reflect on the life of the person now dead, it makes me wonder, how am I doing? Sure, some eulogies wax mighty poetic – as if dear Aunt Louise is a candidate for sainthood, and we find ourselves saying, “really?!” or feeling rather puny in comparison. But I don’t mean, “how am I doing?” in a competitive way; I mean it in a self-reflective way. I wonder, am I living, really living – in the fullness of this precious life given to me? Because sometimes we’re not... really living. There may be some un-lived or not-yet-lived part of our ourselves, entombed.

A good funeral and the surrounding season of grief opens the window. Gives us a few minutes, a few months – maybe longer – during which those questions about how we are or are not yet living in fulness comingle with the spirit of the risen Christ and we ask what next? What now? Not daunted, but ready for truth, ready to live as God would have us live. A path opens. Maybe it’s time to write a new script for our future.

When I meet with families and individuals to plan a funeral, I always tell them about the rubric in the Prayer Book that says, the liturgy for the dead is an Easter liturgy. A Christian funeral derives all its meaning from the proclamation of the resurrection. As Christ has died, is risen, and lives forever in the love of God, so too, has the one who died; so too, shall each of us. That’s our funeral proclamation. When he rose from the dead that Easter morn, it was not Christ alone who was raised; for in Christ, all are made alive.

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### DATE

Easter  
Sunday, April 21, 2019

### PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie Laughlin

**St. Columba's**  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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St. Columba's is a welcoming Christian community that seeks to be open in spirit, deep in faith, rich in worship, active in service.

4201 Albemarle Street NW ■ Washington, DC 20016 ■ 202-363-4119 ■ Columba.org

When we gather for a funeral, it's an Easter liturgy we celebrate.

Surely it follows then that Easter is a funeral liturgy.

Are we here on this fine morning for a funeral?

One you know and love has died. You've come... some quite a distance, to gather with family, with friends to remember, to share stories about Jesus' life, how it is you know him – grateful for the time you spent together, glad to hear other's stories. Welcome! I am glad you could make it. Your presence means a lot. Appropriately, the place is filled with flowers. We have neither casket nor urn – but there's a good explanation. We'll get to that in a moment.

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women came to the tomb. These are the same women who accompanied Jesus and the twelve through the last days in Jerusalem, who witnessed the crowds – both adoring and vengeful, who stayed with Jesus by the cross, until the end, who wept, walked with the mourners, and saw his body laid in the tomb. They've been through it all. They come now, as was the custom (so many customs with funerals), with the spices they had prepared. But they found the stone rolled away, the tomb empty; they did not find the body.

What they heard next from those two in dazzling light are words we proclaim aloud or in the silence of our hearts in the face of death. (And you know this if you've been there when someone dies) We realize: "He is not here, but has risen!" The one we love who has died: he or she is not here, but has risen.

When the women told this news to the eleven and to all the rest, it is no wonder they did not believe. Ever since he died, surely those first disciples had each been absorbed in their own thoughts. What next? What now? My gosh. Each and every one of them had up and left the life they were living to walk with Jesus. Then he was killed, and the bottom fell out of whatever they each expected. Now the tomb is empty, and reports say that he is risen. What now? What next?

Courage, dear ones. It took courage for them to follow Jesus in the first place – to leave their lives, follow their heart, and receive their lives anew. It will take courage now for each of them to figure out the next step. And if we – you and I – are not yet living the fulness of the life to which God calls us, taking a step to do so... That will take courage. You probably have an inkling of the un-lived life within you that Jesus now beckons forth.

Jesus met a lot of people during his time on earth. And he's met a lot of people since he rose from the dead. With everyone he meets, it's the same but different. With everyone he meets he says, I see you, I hear you, I know who you are, I know who you are more fully than you know yourself, I love you; the whole of you. Then he says, come, follow me. I am the way. I have come today that you may have life in abundance. It takes courage to say yes to Jesus because invariably that means leaving some familiar little pattern we're in. Even if it's a crumbly little pattern, more like a rut, it's our rut. It takes courage to get up and go elsewhere.

The Gospel is full of stories of those who heard – but did not heed – Jesus' call: the rich young ruler who clung to his possessions, the paralytic by the pool who preferred being a victim, Pilate, and the temple priests clung fearfully to their scant power; the one who ran back to his mum and dad – he was left behind.

What does it look like – this next step, taken with courage? That depends on who you are. Jesus' path is custom made. Perhaps you know that Hasidic tale: Rabbi Zusya, when he was an old man,

said, "In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me: 'Why were you not Zusya?'" The life to which Jesus is calling you... is for you alone to figure out.

While we each must find our own way, the new life to which we are called always involves integrating those parts that are buried, weaving wholeness from separate strands. Resurrection wholeness is not a solo proposition; it calls us forth, beyond ourselves: expansive and inclusive; an ever-widening circle of embrace. Our family, the community, the nation, the world, all groan in travail, longing to be woven together.

If you were to give the eulogy today – at Jesus' funeral – what would you say about him? The Apostle Peter eulogized Jesus, some time after he'd died – and risen, and ascended into heaven. Those are his words in the reading from Acts. Here, as elsewhere, Peter concludes: I truly perceive that God shows no partiality. This is the inclusive, ever-expansive Easter love our world needs. Paul says the same: God shows no partiality. Being impartial does not mean God does not care. It means God pours out love with abundance on all. No partiality means distinctions between Greek and Jew, slave and free, male and female; distinctions of ethnicity, tribe, gender, nation-state borders, these are of human making, not divine.

Dr. King imagined someone giving the eulogy at his own funeral and said simply, I hope somebody will tell them I tried.

I tried to give my life serving others. I tried to love somebody.

I tried to feed the hungry. I tried to give somebody a hand.

The great preacher Peter Gomes got it just right when he summed up his message for this day:

Easter is not just about Jesus; it is about you.

Easter is not just about death; it is about life.

Easter is not just about the past; it is all about the future.

God has rolled away the stone. Christ is risen. The world awaits as we step out in love.

What next? Take courage. Be of good heart.

Next week, I hope you'll tell a friend, I went to a good funeral not long ago. Jesus had died. But he didn't stay dead. He rose and is risen. And he opened a new path, just as he said: I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And in my life, I now see the stone rolled away. The dark is now light. And I am going to live. Really live. In ways that the world might say are foolish. But God my God is going to rejoice and show us the way. For Christ is risen, indeed.

Precious Lord, take my hand,

Through the storm, through the night

Lead me on to the light

Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home. Amen.