

Death and Rebirth

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Trinity Church in the City of Boston
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A few months ago I had the opportunity to meet with a woman named Katherine, who had been in a major car accident eight years ago. Her legs were crushed and she had sustained severe head injuries. She spent several weeks in a coma and most doctors did not think she would make it. However, eight years later, I'm here to tell you that this woman not only made it she swims over a mile three times a week. She is fit and well. She is healed.

The afternoon that we met she talked about her accident and her very long recovery. Katherine shared in great detail about her struggles and about her frustrations. But she also talked about the generosity and love that surrounded her throughout her entire recuperation. As she shared her story she seemed to have a spirit of joy and positive energy that felt contagious. I was curious how someone who had experienced such suffering could ooze such exuberance. So I asked her how she managed to be so upbeat about such a horrific experience. She said, "Paige, I died in that accident as far as I'm concerned, and by some small miracle I was given a fresh start. I see the world differently now. I appreciate the privilege to live." She had felt particularly grateful. She said she spent more of her time focused on herself than on those around her. She felt like the accident had opened her eyes to how mixed up her priorities had been.

Katherine grew up as a Roman Catholic and she had attended church faithfully, however, she felt like she was just going through the motions week in and week out. Following her accident there was a prayer group from her parish that began to take turns coming to the hospital to say prayers with her. At first, she would just listen to them and lay there quietly. She didn't feel like she really knew how to pray. She didn't trust herself. But over time she began to add in prayers of thanksgiving for her life and for living. Within a matter of months she was reading prayers daily and gaining confidence in her ability to connect with God. Even beginning to say prayers on her own without having to read them. She said over and over again in our conversation that she had a new trust in God after the accident. She now knew the power of God and she understood, with ever more clarity, that new life does come even in near death.

In today's gospel lesson from John, Jesus lets us know that the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified and that in this hour His death is imminent. Jesus doesn't just say that He is going to die, but He says to His followers that we too must be willing to give up our own lives. He says, "Those who love their life lose it and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." This isn't a message about a humble and meek savior who was so weak He was crucified. It is about a strong and demanding savior, who commands our participation in a death that will ultimately give us new life, give us eternal life.

But we must lay down our life in order to serve and follow Jesus and in our death we are born into a new life of God's grace and mercy. If we know life with Christ all these earthly things lose their power and punch for us. Life becomes less about security and safety and the known and more about a longing for union with Jesus. The near death experience that Katherine had showed her the power of a life lived for God. A life that looks sounds and feels quite different. She was able to see that there was a false security in her old way of life and that it couldn't offer what is offered in a life of faith, in a life where we are buried and born again. So, what does a willingness to lose our life look like today? We don't live in a place here where we will be burned at the stake for our Christian beliefs, though there are places in our world where that could happen. So what does this passage mean in our moment today in our time? What does it mean for a single grain of wheat to die in order to bear fruit? As the seed grows in the dark moist soil it needs nourishment and attention. The seed must be watered and given light. Slowly, roots begin to take hold and grow into the ground. First they are very thin and stringy, but over time they gain width and length and they go deeper and deeper into the soil and eventually sprouts begin to push through the earth. As they grow more numerous and stronger they will eventually start to bloom. Finally, there will be the beginnings of fruit. Something new is being made. While it may look like very little is happening on the surface with just few sprouts, inside the ground that one seed has taken on a new form. It has become something different. It has been transformed.

In our own growth as Christians we are like that single seed that is taking on new life. We need time for nourishment and reflection. If we don't tend to those needs then our transformations will be fleeting. It is in this ongoing process of this nourishment that we are called to stay at it, to stay with the struggle, to keep growing. Giving our life over to God and being born anew is something that requires attentiveness on our part before we can see those fruits. As I pondered this idea of the grain of wheat dying, I couldn't help but think about my own plants at home. Every single plant in my house seems to be on the brink of dying most of the time. Somehow, in the busyness of life I find it difficult to remember their need for nourishment. Some plants tucked away in the little corners of our place can go up to two weeks without even a hint of attention. As I pass them by in the morning as we are all getting dressed I'll say to myself, "This little African Violet is wilting." Or "my ficus tree is dropping all of its leaves; I really must water them today and get them into some more sunlight." However, the plants are quickly forgotten when I am distracted by the ring of the phone, the cry of the baby or just the mad hunt for the other shoe that has gone missing. I really do love having a home full of beautiful plants. So much so that after a number of plants have met their demise, due to my neglect, I often race right out and restock, instead of giving them the time, care and attention they need. We're like those plants in our faith if we don't make time in our life to feed our souls our faith might look like my plants. Always thirsting for more and struggling to bear fruit.

Jesus, in this lesson, isn't asking anything small of us. He is asking for all of us, for our whole life. For most of us this isn't something that we just wake up and are able to do. We have to work towards it. First, we have to figure out what, in our life, we haven't been able to give to God and then we start to nurture those seeds so they can grow. It is

life long, this process but the message is clear that God wants all of us and this is what we are called to strive for.

So what in your life might you need to lay down so that you can serve and follow? What might you need to lose so that you can fill yourself with God's love? Is it a drive or desire for power? Is it a hunger for more, more money, more success, just more? Is it fear? Fear of rejection, fear of giving up control? I'm very good at that one. Fear of just losing? There is something out there for all of us that we struggle with but each year we circle back and we relive the Passion story. Each year we enter into the season of Lent as a reminder that we are always called to death before we are able to bear the fruits of a life lived in Christ.

In our life, like that grain of wheat from this passage, we are called to die again and again and return to the earth so that new seeds can sprout and new wisdom can be revealed. We return to this story of Jesus' suffering and death as an opportunity to grow deeper and stronger roots in our faith. So, when He is lifted up from the earth we really may all be drawn to Him. Jesus will indeed be glorified when He is lifted up on that cross. He is over and over again but the question is, are we willing to go to the cross with Him? Are we willing to risk the loss for what will be gained? Are we willing to nurture the seeds of our faith so that we may bear fruit in the world? What a terrifying, liberating, exciting possibility. Amen.