The Last Word

Easter Sunday

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The author Max Lucado tells the story of a doctor in Arkansas who misdiagnosed a patient. He declared the woman to be dead. The family was informed and understandably grief stricken.

Imagine the surprise when the nurse, who was straightening up the patient’s room, discovered that the woman was not in fact dead, but very much alive.

‘You’d better call the family’, she urged the doctor.

Embarrassed, he phoned the husband and said, ‘I need to talk to you about your wife’s condition.’

‘What do you mean, my wife’s condition’, the man said, ‘you told me she’s dead.’

‘Well’, the doctor stammered, ‘there’s been an improvement.’

I don’t know why, but I just love that story. And I’ll tell you; I’m glad I’m not a doctor. I’m probably not smart enough anyway. But I can’t imagine the pressure, the paperwork, the hours they keep. What kind of life would that be? Certainly doctors are well respected, in spite of occasional mistakes. I’m thankful for the care I’ve received over the years. But, as a pastor, I’ve come to realize, that I get to say what the doctor said to the grieving husband, not with embarrassment, but with joy and thanksgiving. You know Jesus, who you thought was dead and gone after the cross and Good Friday. There’s been an improvement. He is alive. He is risen. He is here and now.

I used to be kind of intimidated by doctors when I would visit folks in the hospital. The white lab coat, stethoscope around the neck, all that schooling. They seemed so serious and important. I figured I was there for a little moral support and someone to call on as a last resort. The doctors were the ones with the authority and answers. They were the experts.

But I’ve learned something over the past 38 years visiting hospitals. Doctor’s don’t cure anyone. Every single one of their patients will die. They lose them all. As the pastor, I get the last word. And it is a word of life in the midst of death. And it is a particularly powerful and poignant word this Easter as a virus has reminded us of our mortality in ways we cannot ignore.

But, because Jesus has been raised, I can look death straight in the eye and say, I am not afraid, because I know that my redeemer lives. I can hold the hand of someone who is dying and speak words of comfort and assurance because I know that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. I am not afraid of funeral homes and cemeteries because I know that is not my final destination because Jesus has gone ahead and prepared a place for me in heaven. Because Jesus lives, I get the last word. And it is a word of life and freedom.

And so today I am filled with joy. Because Jesus lives. And he has promised that because he lives you and I will live also. Death does not have the last word. Jesus does. So I’m going to talk some about death. I know it’s something that we don’t like to think about. But until we face death, we are never really free to live. And that is a truth we need to hear.

I’ve been hospitalized 10-15 times over the years and it’s always an adventure. You never know what’s going to happen. Eight or nine years ago I was in for about a week. My roommate was an older gentleman in his 80’s. He had a number of health problems, but was very alert and we enjoyed just talking and watching the Olympics that were on at the time. He also enjoyed visiting with his wife and daughter who spent many hours with him.

He’d been admitted to the hospital because of fluid on his lungs. On Friday, the doctors had drained off several liters, but it was now Monday and he was already filling up again. That afternoon a doctor from the cancer center stopped to see him with some test results. It turned out that the fluid contained cancer cells and his lungs were full of tumors. The man asked, ‘Well what now, doc?’ The doctor became silent for a time and finally said, ‘Well, there may be some chemotherapy we can try.’ I’m no doctor, but I could tell there were no treatments in that man’s future. He was going downhill very fast.

That night about 3 in the morning the nurse came in to make rounds and found that my roommate had died. And that made me sad, not simply that he had died. I kept going back to that conversation he had with the doctor. Again, I’m thankful for all the advances in medical science. But I felt like the man had been shortchanged by the doctor. That the doctor hadn’t told him the truth.

I tried to think what I would have said when the man asked, What now, doc? I like to think I would have said, ‘Sir, you have a very aggressive form of cancer and there is nothing we can do medically to treat it. We will make you as comfortable as possible. I am going to go call your wife and daughter so they can come back and be with you.’ I hope I would have had the courage to tell him the truth. You are mortal. You are dust and to dust you shall return. Because that is the truth.

As Christians, we prepare to celebrate Easter with six weeks of a season called Lent. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday. On Ash Wednesday worship we are marked with a cross of ashes on our forehead and hear the words, Remember, you are dust and to dust you shall return. We prepare for Easter by remembering our death.

I was at a funeral one time at a Roman Catholic Church. At the end of the service, the priest stepped down to the front and said, ‘May God grant a peaceful death to the next one of us God calls home.’ I was kind of creeped out at the time. But I think of that every Ash Wednesday. Because every year, there is someone I have marked with the ashes who will have returned to the dust of their mortality before the next year. Someday, that person will be me.

And that is something we need to remember because we live in a society that is terrified of death, that denies death. A society that promises life to the dying, where there is always one more treatment, one more doctor. We glorify youth and spend billions trying to mask and hold back the passage of time. But none of it works.

That is a sobering reality, but it is not the last word. As Christians, we have two words to speak. It is true; we speak the word that reminds us that, in ourselves, we have no life. We are indeed dust. But we also speak the word of hope that out of death there is new life. There is not just a slight improvement in our condition. There is a radical transformation. We point beyond the ashes, past the cross and grave and we are brought to the empty tomb. And it is the risen Christ who has the last word. And that word is not death, but life. The last word is Jesus saying to you, I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me will not perish, but have everlasting life.

And there is such joy and power in those precious words. Because it means you are free. You are free to live. You are free to let go of your past, let go of your sin and know it has been swallowed up forever in the cross. You are forgiven. Absolutely, completely, totally forgiven. The slate is wiped clean. You are free to let go of your fear and concern for tomorrow. Jesus has secured your future. You don’t know what the future will bring. I don’t know what the future brings. None of us does. I don’t know what your days will bring. But the living Christ lives in you. He will never leave you or forsake you. And one day he will come and take your hand and lead you from death to life. We don’t know what heaven is like, but if Jesus is there, all will be well.

And until that day, you are free to live life to the fullest. You are free to live a life of purpose. A life of service. You are free to live in the presence of the risen and living Christ and walk with him day by day. Like the women at the tomb that first Easter, you are free to go and spread that word of life. And what a life it is. And so, with joy this Easter morning we declare, The Lord is risen. He is risen indeed. And for that we give God thanks and praise. Amen.