

### Introduction:

Have you ever seen a dead person? Have you ever seen someone die? I don't mean in the movies, I mean in real life. Have you ever been to a funeral? Have you ever seen someone buried? What did they mean to you? Was it a loved one or a stranger? Was it hard to watch? Is it hard to remember and think about it right now?

When I was 34, the whole family piled in our car in Spring Hill, Tennessee and drove to Shreveport, Louisiana to visit my father-in-law for the year-end holidays. He didn't know we (and Marita's two brothers) were coming for this surprise visit. The plan was just to show up on Sunday morning at the congregation where he preached. He had been diagnosed with Mesothelioma a few months earlier, and despite rallying at first, he was declining. We messed up on the times of services and arrived at late. The assembly had already started, so we snuck in and sat in the back. When Marita's dad walked up on the stage and turned to face the audience, he saw us. It is a memory I will never forget and do not want to. He was crying and could hardly breathe, it looked like he was about to hyperventilate. One of the men who didn't know we were there thought he was having some kind of cancer based attack and jumped up to try to help him. But it was merely an attack of joy at the sight of us, and he was waved off. Steve finally regained his composure and preached his last sermon. Less than a month later we were racing to make the same trip hoping to see him alive one last time. We didn't make it. We would give anything to see him alive one more time, but we couldn't.

Eight years earlier, when I was 26, while Marita was still in the hospital after Ethan's birth, I received the call that my dad was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Five months later we were at my teenage home, and my father was bedridden, could barely breathe, and all I wanted was for him to get up. But he didn't. He just quit breathing. I can't remember who we called, whether 911 or a direct line to the police or maybe the mortician. We called whoever we were told to call. The police and mortician arrived. They put him in a bag and wheeled him out of the house. I still remember kneeling at his casket, holding his hand, crying like I hadn't cried in 14 years, alone with him at the funeral home while we were working on the arrangements. He looked as if at any minute he would wake up, but he didn't.

Fourteen years before that, when I had been 12 for less than a week and my brother was just one-month old, I was roused from sleep early in the morning while it was still dark and told we had to rush back to the hospital. Something was wrong. My mom wouldn't let me come in to see her before she had her heart transplant or while she was recovering. She was afraid I would be freaked out by all the tubes and wires. She didn't want me seeing her like that. So, I hadn't seen her in days. I watched the sun come up through the window of the waiting room. My dad was called out the waiting room at various times, but I was left there to watch tv and the rising sun. The doctor came into the waiting room, explained the stark realities, expressed his condolences. I was directed into a room. I guess my dad was there with me, I don't really remember. I saw my mother, laying on a hospital bed. No tubes or wires. They had been removed. Her body had rejected the heart transplant she had experienced just days earlier. We were in London, England, one of the two leading hospitals that conducted the pioneering procedure of heart transplants back in 1985. But the miracle of modern medicine had failed. And she lay there, seemingly asleep. This time I was the one who could hardly breathe. And all I wanted was for her to wake up, but she wouldn't.

It is hard for me to even tell these stories. But **Ecclesiastes 7:2** says it is good to go to the house of mourning because the living take it to heart. Have you ever been to the house of mourning? You will.

In these moments, we hurt and get angry. How could God make us go through this? Watching loved ones suffer and die is one of the hardest things to endure. And yet, I can't help but recognize that God is not allowing us to go through anything He hasn't gone through Himself. Can you imagine what God felt and saw nearly 2000 years ago as the crowds mocked His only Son, as the soldiers brought the scourge upon His back and legs, as they stretched His arms out on the cross and hammered the nails through His wrists? Can you imagine what God felt as our sins marred the visage of His perfect and sinless Son? The event was so cosmically horrific even the sun was blotted out from the sky. God was in the house of mourning. But there was one significant difference. Praise the Lord, on the third day, Jesus woke up! As **Matthew 28:5-6** declares, when the women went to Jesus's tomb on the third day, they were met by an angel who announced, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said."

Brothers and sisters, friends and neighbors, we are here this morning because Jesus was different. We are here, not simply because Jesus died, but because He arose. We are not here because as the religious world mistakenly believes we need to experience an annual celebration of Jesus's resurrection. We do not need to do that. God hasn't

asked for that. But we gather here each week because on this day of the week, Jesus arose. Without that resurrection, gathering here would be silly and pointless, but because of that resurrection, what we do this morning is significant and powerful. And whether we like it or not, whether we agree with it or not, every single one of us can't help but think about that resurrection on this day. Instead of trying to direct our minds away from what we are already thinking about, I want to capitalize on it. Resurrection happened! But what on earth does it mean?

Discussion:

I. The Winner is Jesus

- A. The greatest fear modern man faces is, of course, speaking in public. But the second greatest fear is death. We are scared to death of death. We want to avoid it at all costs. Even those who claim not to be afraid of it usually don't want to be in the same room with it when it comes.
- B. In the ancient world, Egyptian Pharaohs built humongous pyramid tombs and stocked them with treasures, goods, and even dead servants in hopes it would give them victory over death. The Gnostics tried to develop and learn secret knowledge because they thought it would allow them to traverse the realms of death and give them victory over it. In the 1500s Ponce de Leon travelled to Florida, and legend says he came looking for the fountain of youth. And that fight against death has continued through today. Plastic surgery is in its heyday as folks fight aging and death. Hospitals are full of folks on life support because they are trying to eke out another day before they face death no matter what. Cryogenics is a science today because the rich hope to cheat and defeat death.
- C. No matter how we feel about various popular stories, can we help but notice how many of them center around the proper way to defeat or master death? In the end, the seven part saga of Harry Potter is actually about the proper way to master death, not by killing as Voldemort did, but by love as Potter and his friends did. The emperor Palpatine wishes to defeat death and lures his prize pupil, Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader to his side by promising to help his love cheat death, but in the end it is only those who become one with the light side of the force who come back after death as the Jedi's glow in the dark still-kind-of-living buddies. Neo was the chosen one because he didn't die in the Matrix. Despite how ungodly the movies are, even some Christians, sadly, idolized Bruce Willis/John McClane because he was "Die Hard." Let's face it, when Haley Joel Osment claimed he could see dead people in "The Sixth Sense," part of the draw was the hope that after we die we can still right wrongs and fix problems. The ending of "Lost" where everyone dies and yet still lives happily ever after, shows that even our popular culture is desperately trying to figure out some way to beat death, be prepared for it, and somehow be at peace with it. And you cannot convince me that the present fascination with all things zombie apocalypse (though I think the fad is now waning) doesn't stem from our desire to think that somehow we'll be able to defeat death when it comes attacking.
- D. And yet, to date, no one has won the battle with death except One. Jesus, the One called Messiah and Christ. In **Matthew 16:18**, Jesus explains that the gates of Hades, that is, the realm of the dead, would not prevail against Him and His church. He was going to take death head on and He declared He would win (see also **Matthew 16:21**). And that is exactly what happened.
- E. In this corner, the Grim Reaper, death, and the grave, weighing in with the weight of a tomb, reigning and undefeated champion. And in this corner, the scrappy contender who won't give up, the challenger who is despised and rejected by men, whom no one esteems (see **Isaiah 53**). No one can imagine that this One can possibly win this fight. No one ever has. He must be on that cross because He is smitten by God and afflicted. In fact, He has been knocked down. He is down for the count. The referee slaps his hand on the mat, "One day." He slaps it down again, "Two days." He brings it down again, "Three days." Everyone thinks the challenger is done for and defeated, but He springs up with new life and deals the death blow to death Himself. The winner is Jesus!!!
- F. Friends, I mean no disrespect to the beliefs of others, but Buddha died and was cremated. His ashes scattered in relics, some of which adherents claim are still extant. Confucius died and his tomb can be visited in Qufu, China. Mohammed died and pilgrimage to his tomb in the Mosque of the Prophet can be made to Medina, Saudi Arabia. Joseph Smith is buried in a family cemetery in Nauvoo, IL. But Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of the Father (**Acts 7:55-56**). Jesus defeated death.

II. Do you want to win?

- A. Imagine for a moment that the story started to circulate that someone had died, was buried, and a few days later came back from the dead. There were all kinds of testifying proofs that it was true. Would you want to meet them? I would. Of course I would. Why? I'd want to know how they did it. I'd want to get close to them to see if some of it would rub off on me.

- B. The resurrection of Jesus means something about Jesus. It means He is the winner. He is the victor. He knows. He is the only one who can save us from death. In fact, the book of **Acts** is a testimony to who Jesus is because of the resurrection. According to **Acts 2:36**, the resurrection made Jesus both Lord and Christ. **Acts 5:31** says it made him Leader and Savior, who gives repentance and forgiveness. **Acts 10:42** says it means He is the judge of both the living and the dead. This last sentiment is repeated in **Acts 17:31**. According to **Romans 1:4**, Jesus is declared the Son of God by His resurrection. According to **I Thessalonians 1:9-10**, the resurrection means that Jesus is the deliverer from God's wrath.
- C. Who wouldn't want to know Jesus? Isn't this exactly what Paul says in **Philippians 3:7-16**? He wants to know Jesus so he can know the power of His resurrection. He wants to be found in Jesus so he can attain the resurrection from the dead. My friends, this is ever so much more than visiting Jesus on the weekends. This is making Jesus our lives. Do you want to defeat death? Then get to know the only one who ever did. No wonder there is salvation in no other name but Jesus's (**Acts 4:12**).

### III. Victory over a living death.

- A. There is more to the life Jesus offers than the reward at the end. Sadly, I think we sometimes spend too much time thinking life simply means heaven. So we put off the decision to get to know Him, to be found in Him. We try to maintain an acquaintance with Jesus by going to church every once in a while, maybe even every week, and making sure we don't do any really bad sins, but we don't want to put a damper on our lives by being too close to Jesus too soon. Oh sure, by the time we get to our death beds, we want to be completely in Jesus, but we are afraid that will cramp our style if we start that radical process too soon.
- B. What we rarely realize is the living death we face even now. **Ephesians 2:1** claims we are dead in our trespasses and sins. **Isaiah 59:1-2** explains that these sins separate us from God. We live, but we are dead. Some don't realize it as they pursue the pleasures of sin and think they are living life to the fullest. However, even in a seemingly godless culture there are hints that many can feel the death all around them and in them.
- C. Just listen to the years of popular culture and the cries for life in the midst of the numbness of death. Go all the way back to Simon and Garfunkel as they sang the benefits of being a rock and an island that doesn't feel. But their musical descendants have claimed they were wrong. As Adam Gontier and Three Days Grace sang of addiction and recovery in "Pain," they intoned, "You're sick of feeling numb. You're not the only one. I'll take you by the hand and show you a world that you can understand. This life is filled with hurt when happiness doesn't work. Trust me and take my hand when the lights go out you'll understand." When they claimed, "I'd rather feel pain than nothing at all," they shouted the anthem of so many who linger in addiction and compulsions like cutting. Many simply can't understand why anyone would get started with a painful compulsion like cutting. But John Rzeznick and the Goo Goo Dolls expressed the feelings of many that produce these kinds of compulsions when they crooned, "When everything feels like the movies, you bleed just to know you're alive." When Trent Reznor of "Nine Inch Nails" and then Johnny Cash sang, "I hurt myself today to see if I still feel, I focus on the pain, the only thing that's real," they were expressing the feeling of living death. How did they get there? The song explains that "In the end everyone goes away." Whether that was talking about losing friends and loved ones through death, or just the fact that people are fickle and abandon you when times are bad, the point was the same. Plus, as they surveyed what their fame and fortune had actually brought them, they concluded it was an "empire of dirt." Everything they pursued left them empty, numb, feeling dead. So they went to the extreme of hurt and pain just to know they were still living.
- D. The fact is even those who haven't felt these extremes and knew they were the living dead are still longing for abundant life not realizing how dead they are and how useless their pursuit is. Just consider Billy Joel's "Only the Good Die Young." It's almost 40 years old, but it is still anthemic. It has a catchy tune, and is fun to hum or sing along to, but it broke my heart the day I realized the message I had been singing along to. "They say there's a heaven for those who will wait, some say it's better but I say it ain't. I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints, the sinners are much more fun. You know that only the good die young." What did Billy Joel want? He wanted life. He wanted abundant life. The problem is he thought it came through sexual immorality, rebellion, sin. And isn't that what Satan has promised from the very beginning? God says sin produces death, but Satan (and Billy Joel) says, "You won't die, you'll have a better life" (see **Genesis 3:4-5**). People reject Jesus because they think He is spoiling life, hampering life, ruining life with all His rules about holiness. Granted, I know too many Christians walk around, as a comedian I once heard say, like they've been sucking on a sour pickle. Too many look like they've died and just not had the good grace to lie down anywhere. And shame on us for that.
- E. According to **John 10:10**, Jesus came so we could have abundant life. Abundant life doesn't come from sin. Oh sure, some momentary pleasures can, but not abundant living. Notice what Paul says about Abraham in

**Romans 4:16-25.** What was it that Abraham believed? He believed that God gives life to the dead. He knew that God could take his dead body and Sarah's dead womb and produce life. Paul understood that kind of faith. He knew what it was like to be plagued with death. In **Romans 7:24**, he recounted his own moment of despair, "Oh wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (ESV). In **vs. 25**, he had an answer: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ the righteous" (ESV). And then he draws the conclusion in **Romans 8:11**: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you" (ESV).

- F. It just makes sense, doesn't it? If you want abundant life, get to know the one who defeated death. Follow His advice. Do what He says.

#### Conclusion:

Having said all of this, I don't want to deceive you. Sadly, too often I think we are looking for easy outs. The abundant life is not found at the end of the path of least resistance. The abundant life isn't given to those who have a passing acquaintance with Jesus. Go back to **Philippians 3:7-14**. Pursuing abundant life is not for the faint of heart. It is not for those who are satisfied with mediocrity. It is not for those who want to put in half an effort. It's only for those who are ready to go all in, for those who are ready to pursue any means possible to know Jesus Christ and the power of His resurrection, even if it includes sharing in His sufferings. After all, Jesus's path to abundant living first went through a cross. Yes, Billy Joel, Jesus died young. But He conquered death and the grave. And the question is left for us, are we willing to follow Him? After all, no one else has ever beaten death. But Jesus did. And every one of us that gets to know Him will.