

I preached a graveside funeral service a couple of weeks ago for someone that I really didn't know well. People always ask me, "Is it hard to do a funeral for someone you never knew?" The answer is no. Usually, the family is more than willing to share information about the person who has died and finds the process to be therapeutic and helpful. The funerals that are hard to preach are those where I know the person well and everyone else knows the person well, and there is not much to say. I've been to funerals before where the preacher has made the deceased person sound like Mother Teresa when everyone and their dog knows he was a lying scoundrel incapable of loving anyone but himself. Obviously, that is not a good approach!

Thankfully, I wasn't faced with that problem at this last funeral. Before the graveside service began I had time to visit with the family. One of the family members was an astronaut and I found it very interesting to talk to someone who had been in space. Let me give you some advice. If you ever meet an astronaut who has been on a space mission, do not ask the following question: "Was it really fast when you took off?" You should have seen the look on the astronaut's face when I asked him that question. Duh!! Yes, it's fast when you have a rocket propelling you into space! After I made a fool of myself with the astronaut, I walked over to the side and prepared for the service as everyone gathered around. Then a funny thing happened. I found myself standing at the edge of the hole in the ground that had been dug for the casket. I don't know why this thought crossed my mind but it did. I thought to myself, "One day I will be in a hole much like this one." I realize that is morbid but it's true. One day all of us will die. Some of us will die of diseases – heart disease, cancer, etc. Others will die in accidents. While others of us will die from "unexplained causes". Simply put, we are mortal human beings who have a life span. When we are born the clock starts ticking and we take off on this amazing journey called life. Some of us get to live 100 years. Others get 60 or 70, while unexplainably sometimes, some of us only get a few years, but we all have been given the gift of life and the opportunity to live for God.

It is inconceivable to think of going through life without God, yet there are countless numbers of people who do just that. I'm not necessarily talking about atheists who do not believe in the existence of God, but more about those who believe in God, but do not believe that God has anything to do with us. I not only believe in God, but I believe in a God who is active in

November 4, 2007

our lives and is in relationship with us. I don't always understand God or why things happen the way they do sometimes, but I believe God is with us and for us. An honest agnostic asked a minister how he knew there was a God. The minister replied, "Because I talked to Him a few minutes ago." The funny thing about faith is that God will not allow us to have faith for someone else. God will not allow you to believe for your daughter. God will not allow you to answer for your son or husband. God seeks relationships with all of us and like I said before, to think of going through life without God is beyond me.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain." Paul made those statements because there were people in church at Corinth claiming that there was no such thing as a resurrection from the dead. So Paul, in effect, said, "Okay, if there is no such thing as a resurrection then your faith is futile and none of this matters because when we die we die and that's it. End of story." Think about it for a second. We are hinging everything about our faith and lives on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If there is not a resurrection then what are we doing here this morning? If there is no resurrection then pardon me, but I think I would rather be golfing this morning. If there is no resurrection then excuse me, but I think I would like to fishing on Sunday mornings. If there is no resurrection then count me out when it comes to attending a Bible study or leading a Confirmation class for kids. Think about it. If there's no resurrection then what in the world would there be to "confirm" in Confirmation? Simply put, if there is no resurrection then there is no church and there is no hope. We might as well throw caution to the wind and live it up now because this is all there is and all there ever will be. But...there is a resurrection! Jesus Christ was raised from the dead and has promised us the same thing. And since we are a people of the resurrection we should live like people who have been redeemed and saved.

The Dorchester was a ship that left New York harbor during WWII. The ship was bound for England with 1,600 American troops aboard. One night, after midnight, the lookout on the bridge spotted a German torpedo less than a hundred yards away. The captain turned the ship, but it was too late. The torpedo blew a hole twenty feet in diameter in the ship. Then came the dreaded cry, "abandon ship." All of the soldiers were instructed to put on their life belts and rush to the upper deck. Lifeboats were then

November 4, 2007

launched into the icy waters off the Greenland coast. But some of the soldiers reported that they didn't have a life vest. There had been a terrible mistake – not enough life vests to go around. Several teenagers, were frozen to the deck rail as they looked at the icy waters without hope.

Four chaplains on deck were helping men get into the lifeboats. When they saw the frantic young men without life belts, they buckled their own belts around the soldiers and shoved them into the last lifeboat to leave the ship. Those who lived to report the tragedy remembered the four chaplains putting their arms around each other and bowing their heads in prayer as the waters engulfed them. The chaplains – a priest, a rabbi, and two Protestant ministers – died so that others might live.

God did much the same thing when he sent his Son Jesus Christ to die for you and me. He saw that we were as helpless as soldiers on a sinking ship and extended not a life vest to us, but his Son Jesus Christ in the flesh. Sometimes I think we underestimate what that really means and how it should impact what we do with our lives. God gave his Son not so we could do as we please and live for ourselves. No, God gave his Son so that we might have life and have it in abundance, but beyond that, share the love of Christ with others. In other words, if we say we believe in resurrection then our lives ought to reflect it – not so much in being perfect because no one is perfect, but more in how we love others. You know I don't have to ask someone what he or she believes or who he or she lives for. Usually, it's pretty clear. Just open your eyes and look at the person's life. Look at your own life. Do you live for yourself or God? Do you live for pleasing others or pleasing God? Do you look for opportunities to serve or opportunities to be served?

Gaston Foote once told a story about Ivan the Terrible. Ivan the Terrible was the first ruler of Russia to crown himself Czar. As you can tell by his name, Ivan was not a joy to be around! He lived in the 1500's and killed his only son in a fit of anger. Ivan was not the type to volunteer to bring cookies to the PTA meeting. One day Ivan decided that he needed to get married, so he dispatched some of his servants to find the most beautiful girl of royal blood. They found her in Athens, Greece. Her name was Sophia, daughter of the King of Greece. When Ivan asked the King for his daughter's hand, the King made him promise to join the Greek Orthodox Church.

November 4, 2007

Ivan went to Athens accompanied by five hundred of his best soldiers. They in turn volunteered to join the church with him. When the priests outlined the articles of confession to the soldiers they agreed to all of them except one. This article stated that if they joined the church they could not be professional soldiers. They asked themselves: “How can we join the church and remain in the army at the same time?”

They came up with the following plan: All five hundred of them, together with five hundred priests, would march in the water at the same time. But before each priest would take his candidate under water, each soldier grabbed his sword, lifted it in the air and was baptized save for his fighting arm and gleaming sword. They were saying they would join the church with their bodies but their fighting arms would remain in possession of the state.

How many of us have done the same thing in our commitment to Jesus? It’s called partial surrender – giving just enough of ourselves to think we are “covered”, when in reality we have an unbaptized arm sticking up in the air! This does not mean that we expect to be perfect when we commit to a relationship with Jesus, but it does mean that we give him all of us there is to give and we do so not out of obligation with the wrong motives.

In his book, *Scent of Love*, Keith Miller wrote about an experience he had one day with his seven-year-old daughter Mary-Keith. She had come home from school after encountering for the first time a physical fitness test that President Kennedy had instituted. She came home in tears. Keith asked his daughter, “What’s the matter?” She replied, “It’s the chin-ups! I didn’t do too well. I was only able to hold on for eight seconds.” Her dad responded, “Honey, that’s okay. A lot of people can’t even hang on the bar at all.” “Yes, but Susan did twenty-four seconds – and Bobby loves Susan!” said Mary-Keith.

Well, being like most “fix-it” Daddies Keith set up a pull-up bar in the yard so Mary-Keith could practice her chin-ups. Before the next day and the next fitness test Keith said a prayer with his daughter: “Dear Lord, help Mary-Keith on the test tomorrow to do the best she possibly can. Help her to learn something from this experience, and to give it all she’s got. In Jesus’ name, Amen.” The next day came and when she got home from school she was beaming. Keith asked her, “Well, how long did you hang on the bar?” She answered, “Twenty-five seconds!” “How did you do it?” “I did just what you said Daddy, I prayed. When I got up there and started

November 4, 2007

getting real tired, I whispered to God, ‘Let me beat Susan! Let me beat Susan! Let me beat Susan!’”

Obviously, Mary-Keith’s improvement on the chin-up test is to be commended but maybe not her motivation! As we come to the Lord’s Table this morning let’s not come out of obligation. Let’s not come out of guilt. Let’s not come as if we are doing God a favor by showing up. Let’s come to the table to say to God that we are taking our place at the table that has been reserved for us by the blood of Christ. Let’s say to God that we trust in his promise of resurrection – not only for those who have gone before us but for us as well. Amen.