

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
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5th Sunday after Lent

Conversations with Jesus that bring life

Have you made your funeral plans? No, don't get me wrong. I am not telling you that you are going die before next Sunday. Although none of us really know. And we are getting closer to that end of the world date that the radio ministry in California had predicted would be May 21, next month. And no the funeral homes are not paying me to advertise.

I'm just wondering if you have talked to anyone about what you would like for your funeral. Unfortunately, it is often only at funerals that we celebrate someone, and what their life has meant to us. Too bad we don't usually sit down with them to ask them what they would like to be the centre of the service which will celebrate their lives and give glory to God.

Now when you talk about your funeral, make sure you tell your loved one what area of your life is most important to you, that someone should talk about. Make sure you tell them the music you would like. Make sure you tell them what Scriptures would need to be a part of the service. Make sure you tell them what you want done with the last physical possession we own, our bodies.

I've sat down with hundreds of members of the families who have been quite caught off guard in terms of what they would like to see for their services. Rarely, someone leaves a long list of details that makes you wonder if they really thought they would be in control of the service well after they were gone. And of course, update your will, or make sure you have one. This is just a matter of relieving others of the legal grief they will go through if you do not have a will on file somewhere.

And these matters are not just a way of talking about death, no, the will and the funeral details are about life continuing, when you have gone on to your reward. And if you are really young and are saying to yourself, I have lots of time to do this, don't kid yourself. Unfortunately, accidents happen all the time. Talk to some of the nurses or doctors here. I am sure they have some stories to tell, as long as they don't mention the names.

And this is a way to talk about important stuff. What was/ what is your life really about? What was/ what is your passion? You might be surprised how few people can answer this question for the loved one who has just passed away. Eventually, something will be said for everyone. But these funeral questions focus the mind on what really is important, and puts our mortality in front of us again.

The Scriptural account about Lazarus does the same. It brings us and those who follow Jesus into the home of someone who has just lost someone very close to them. Mary and Martha are famous sisters who are well known to many of us. Mary stayed close to Jesus and listened to what he said while Martha was more concerned about the housekeeping and meal preparation. We get the impression that Mary is the spiritual one and Martha, not so much. But in this encounter, we find both Mary and Martha are women who strongly trust the Lord. Martha meets Jesus first when he and his followers arrive. She says, "I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." (11:22) This is a statement of a profound trust and faith in Jesus Christ, even in the midst of her loss. Jesus follows this statement up with the question about her believing that Lazarus her brother will rise again. She says she does believe this will happen at the last day. (11:24)

And in response to Martha's great faith, Jesus reveals himself as the resurrection and the life. To which, again Martha's faith is a cameo where she speaks her faith as strongly as Peter ever did, "I believe that you, Jesus, are the Messiah, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." (11:27)

Later on, Mary echoes the exact words of Martha, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." (11:21 cf 11:32) Both Martha and Mary had a deep trust in Jesus. They had seen and heard what he had done in many places and with many kinds of illnesses and distresses. Jesus knew that both Martha and Mary strongly trusted him. Instead of going through the whole discussion he had with Martha a second time with Mary, he simply asks where Lazarus' body had been laid.

They go up to where the body had been laid. And again we have to put aside our cultural experience of cemeteries and realize that in that place and time many bodies were placed in caves and a large stone rolled over the opening, rather than placing them in the ground as we do. Jesus goes near the entrance to the cave. And then we read the shortest verse in the Bible: Jesus wept.

And from this shortest verse, the easiest verse to memorize, we recognize that Jesus was with Martha and Mary in their loss, even as he is with us in our losses. Know that he is. Know that he cares. Know that whatever you have gone through, no matter how badly you have been sinned against, no matter what pain or outrage you have experienced, Jesus is weeping with you and for you. He knows, more even than we do. And he is for us, not against us. Why do we have to go through the losses and difficulties and challenges we have to go through; I do not know. I believe he does. But I also believe he wants to hold us and love us in the midst of the loss.

You know the end of the story of Lazarus. Jesus asks that the stone be rolled away. Then we hear again the practical side of Martha, where she says to Jesus, "Lord, it will stink. His body has been in there four days in the heat." This is something like the spit test of last week, we have the stink test of this week, and Jesus appears to not be concerned about these things, but rather about health and life.

Jesus calls Lazarus by name, just as he calls us by name. Lazarus responds. Many of us do as well. Jesus shows he is Lord, not only of healing, and of the Sabbath, of spiritual encounters, but now Lord over death. It is a small Easter event before the big Easter event. It is a sign and a wonder before the sign of signs and the wonder of wonders. It is the last major miracle Jesus accomplishes before Palm Sunday in chapter 12 of John, which is next week.

There is so much life in what Jesus does, we forget we are talking about the Creator, the Life Giver, as we speak about Jesus. The Church is involved in our lives, at birth and baptism, at death and funerals, at weddings, and confirmations and membership celebrations, at ordinations and inductions, at the opening and closing of church buildings. Jesus has much life to transfer to us and through us. It all comes back to trusting him. We need to trust him for the big things, and communicating with our loved ones about them.

It is also about trusting him with the little things, like our voting for someone who will be a good leader and steward of our financial resources, our nationhood, our country. Also, you can look on a website to find out if your local candidate has agreed to make poverty reduction an important part of his or her work as an MP. You can find this at candidatesagainstpoverity.ca.

We need to trust the Lord for our voting, for our talking, for our telling others what's important to us. We need to speak out for what we believe Jesus would want us to speak out.

He knows us as he knew Mary and Martha and Lazarus. He loves us as he loved them. He is no longer physically present, so now we have to trust beyond our physical senses, something that we do all the time when our loved ones are away. But Jesus is not away, but here. Although we do not necessarily have the best scientific models for incorporating the spiritual into the other realms of our lives, nevertheless, it is there and prominent.

Let us trust Jesus with our lives, with our death, with our losses and with our celebrations. Let us once again invite him into every part of our lives.

Let us pray.