

What About Death?

I Corinthians 15: 19-26; Hebrews 2: 14-16; Rev. 1: 17b-18

**First Presbyterian Church
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Dogs come into our lives
to teach us about love,
they depart
to teach us about loss.¹

I'm so grateful for dogs. They've
patiently endured centuries of living on
scraps, hanging around and loyally
keeping us company until we finally let

them all the way in. Now children learn so much about love from dogs. There is a natural collusion between a child and the dog in the family. "Hey, you don't want to eat those beans? Slip them down to me under the table and I'll take care of them. A child's dog becomes not only a playmate but a confidant. And dogs endure all manner of pounding and poking from the children. An overlooked service is how dogs teach us about death. It's one of life's early pangs when we lose a childhood pet. Death is no longer abstract but real. Our heart breaks. But not in the same way that it breaks when a human family member dies. We learn to deal with these harder deaths through the shorter life spans of our pups. It's quite a gift.

I got a call recently from a seminary classmate. I haven't seen Bill in years, but we used to play a lot of racquetball together. He's a large guy and always had a way of body-blocking me out of getting to a shot. Bill loves all things Great Britain. He arranged to do his pastoral internship in Scotland. So he had lots of recommendations for where to stay on our honeymoon, and his picks were perfect. Bill married after I did, but I remember how excited he was to have met and married Lane, whom he affectionately called Muffin. She was just right for him. It stunned me to hear that she had died a year ago. I know it knocked the stuffing out of my friend. He went on and retired recently. Just lost the zeal for it after losing his Lane. This was one of those losses that is not so close that it overshadows everything. But it's close enough to make me feel it, to realize the inevitability of death, and the wrenching, rending separations we all face. How do we face death? What happens after death? To me? To the ones I love? Will I see them again?

Once more, we're asking a question that we cannot answer on our own. Because we can't go find out about death and then come back to tell about it.

This week I found an article by a counsellor full of quotations from writers about the different kinds of loss to death we experience.² Here are a few:

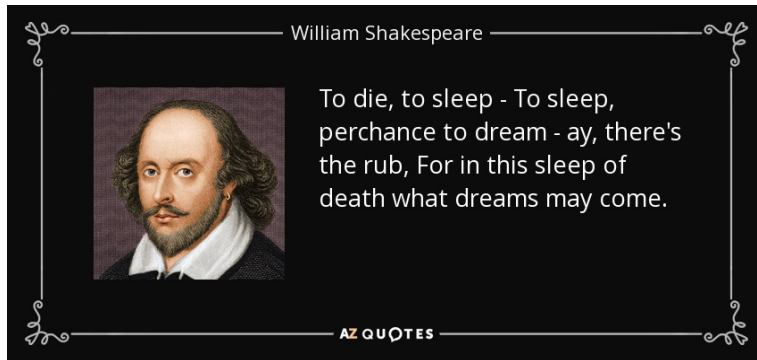
Death of a Friend "Even the best of friends cannot attend each other's funeral," says author Kehlog Albran anticipating the deep sadness at the thought of a friend's death. In her story *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, Katherine Anne Porter speaks "Death always leaves one singer to mourn."

Loss of a Sibling. John Corey Whaley describes what it's like to be the brother of a missing boy. He says, "...a part of my very being had gone with him. Stories about us could, from then on, be told from only one perspective." The loss of a sibling or a friend as close as a brother with whom you've shared memories that go way back, cuts you off from your past. In her book *My Sister's Keeper*, Jodi Picoult writes, "If you have a sister and she dies, do you stop saying you have one?"

Loss of a Child. The death of a child upends the natural order of everything. Parents have the ground taken out from under them and wonder how to ever find a sense of normal again. Wayne Loder writes, "When your child dies you find your life is forever divided into 'before' and 'after'." Another writer adds, "When you have a child in Heaven you live in limbo between 'here' and 'there'." Madeline Miller poignantly writes, "When he died, all things soft and beautiful and bright would be buried with him." It just rips you to shreds. to show what a dark time death can produce.

Death of a Parent. Another author notes, "That's the thing when your parents die, you feel like instead of going in to every fight with backup, you are going into every fight alone." Put another ways, there's no ceiling above you, sheltering you from the future. You're the one on deck now for the death that is to come, and it causes us to consider the whole meaning of the years that have passed. Death forces us to consider the meaning of our brief lives and loves that come before it.

We live everyday with the grief for those taken by death, from pets to parents, from children to friends and siblings. The present loss stings. But then we also worry about what is to come. If it's just nothing, we despair thinking that those we love just go out of existence, and we will soon be no more as well. But if there is more, what is it like?



This was the fear confronting Hamlet when he struggled over whether to keep on living in a world so full of betrayal and deception. Why not just go to sleep? He said, “To die, to sleep—to sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there’s the rub, for in this sleep of death what

dreams may come..” What if what comes next is worse? This is a question I simply cannot answer by myself, for I cannot see in to death, and I cannot die and then come back.

Not surprisingly for us as Christians, the answer is always Jesus. That can sound trite, until we realize the depth of meaning contained in the events of his life. We saw two weeks ago that God simply would not be without us; he would not let us be alone without him. So God crossed the divide between us in taking up our flesh and blood as Jesus. God answered the question of our loneliness first by brothering us in Jesus, and then by sending his Spirit to join us to all Jesus is and does. So God companions us in the deepest part of us with the indwelling Spirit of Jesus. Last week we saw how the question of guilt plagues us. Our strategies for guilt management work for a moment, but ultimately leave us worse off than we were before. Working harder, rationalizing, blaming, stuffing it—those all destroy our soul. But Jesus takes our sins with him to the cross. He cancels the record of debt that stood against us by making it his own. And he gives to us his rightness. So today we will see that the resurrection of Jesus answers the question of death the way nothing else can. Let’s recall our passage from Hebrews:

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. (Hebrews 2: 14-15).

The Triune God’s desire is to regather his lost children to himself. He wants to restore us to communion and everlasting life. His surprising plan included becoming like us—so human that the God who is life itself was actually able to die. Death was the curse triggered by human sin. We invited the thorn into our hearts and into the world. To pull the thorn, the Son of God became subject to our dying. He took the thorn of death into himself. The cross killed him. But the glorious turn in the story, the happiest event in all of history, is that on the third

day Jesus rose, never to die again. His dying and rising took the sting out of death. It took the bite out of the devil's accusations that we will die alone, condemned and in ever lasting misery. Not so for those in Christ!

Let's go back to a man we talked with two weeks ago. Joseph Ratzinger confronted the terror modern man faces in seeing death as the end of us.



Death is absolute loneliness.

But Christ strode through that gate
of our final loneliness

Where no voice can reach us any longer,

there is Christ!

Death appears to be utter aloneness and darkness. There is no more contact. No more connection. It is the end. Such isolation is hellish. That is the fate of all human beings doomed to die and it fills even our best thinkers with terror. But wait. The Son of God took up our flesh and blood in order that he himself could die like we do. He has been to the dark regions and filled them with his light. He has endured the utter isolation so that we need never experience it. The life of God has entered the realm of death and nothing has been the same. Love penetrated hell and set it ablaze with light.

Death's grip is broken. Christ has shattered the cell doors of death. We don't have to stay in the lonely, personal hell of our sin. We don't have to fear everlasting separation from our Lord or our loved ones. The entire experience of death is different for those in Christ. Amidst the tears common to all at graveside, a quiet peace pervades those who know the one who pillaged death.

So Ratzinger imagines Jesus saying to us: "I arose and now I am still with you." My hand upholds you. Wherever you may fall, you will always fall into my hands. I am present even at the door of death. Where no one can accompany you further, and where you can bring nothing, even there I am waiting for you, and for you I will change darkness into light. Even in the hour of the supreme solitude of death, you are not ever alone!"³

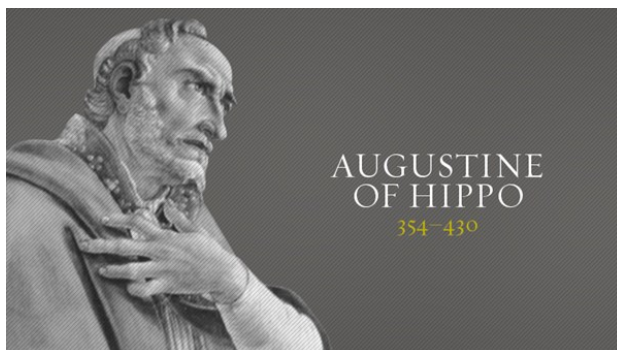
When Martha of Bethany wept bitterly over the death of her beloved brother Lazarus, Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in

me, though he dies, yet shall he live” (Jn. 11: 35). Soon after Jesus would tell his closest disciples, “Because I live, you also will live” (Jn. 14: 19). What do we do about death? We get joined up to the one who for our sakes became a man who could die, so that we could experience the full effect of death for all of us. This Jesus did so that in his rising, he could pull the thorn of death from our hearts. He defeated death and filled the state of utter aloneness with his light and presence.

How beautifully this fits with the words we read from Paul, “For as by a man came death, by a man came also the resurrection from the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” (I Cor. 15: 21-22). We are all in Adam because we are all human, subject to death. If we want everlasting life, we have to make the transfer, from Adam to Christ. From being lost in ourselves to being found in Jesus. We put all our hope in Jesus who died and in Jesus who rose. We give him our allegiance. In life and in death, we say, “I belong to you. I am yours. Your servant. Your child. You are my King. My brother. My captain. My Lord. In you is life, Lord Jesus, apart from you I have no good.”

Such trust transforms us. Yes, we still go through grief. We still feel the sting of loved ones passing away from us. But we do not despair. Peace that passes understanding rises in our hearts. We know that the darkness of death has been lit up with Christ who went there for us and we are never alone, not even in death. In Christ, our loved ones are well, and we will see them again.

In Jesus’ death and resurrection is all our hope. And what a hope it is! This changes everything. 1600 years ago a northern African bishop named Augustine described this hope. His interlocking words weave a tapestry of simple, profound beauty. Let’s give Augustine the last word on what we anticipate the other side of death in the presence of the living God.



All shall be Amen and Alleluia.
We shall rest, and we shall see.
We shall see, and we shall know.
We shall know, and we shall love.
We shall love, and we shall praise.
Behold our end, which is no end.

¹ Erica Jong ,[quoteency.com/quote/802619/Erica-Jong](https://www.quoteency.com/quote/802619/Erica-Jong)

² Michele Meleen, “The 16 Saddest Death Quotes You’ll Ever Read,” <https://dying.lovetoknow.com/words-comfort-after-death/saddest-death-quotes>.

³ Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, pp. 300-301 and, as Benedict XVI, *The Faith*, pp. 82-85.1