

Children's time: What are these? (hold up the tulips). They are pink tulips, something we can have here today, but only because they were raised in a bright, warm greenhouse. So are there tulips in your garden where it is not bright and warm. Are they dead? Luckily, the bulbs in your garden are deep, deep under the soil, resting, getting ready for spring which is when those first green shoots come up. And then they bloom, like this tulip. Bulbs rest in the winter. It's like a loooooong night, like when you too get your rest. And then, as Hymn #311 says, "LOVE is come again, like wheat that springeth green." So be patient. Spring will come. There will be green. AND, your tulips are not dead!!

I am calling this sermon, DEATH Part TWO because Joe Falo gave us

Part One, when he began his sermon on death with these words: *I have maybe more fear than the average bear about dying and its corollaries (torture, being attacked, being murdered). And yet, I've been around long enough to know that I will die, and I have no control over when or just how I'll die. Today I'd like to talk about physical death.*

PHYSICAL DEATH is what I'm also going to talk about. First, do we assume that if we live the good life, we will go straight to heaven, sit on a cloud and pluck a lyre? Or if we live a wicked life, we go to hell, doing a stint in purgatory along the way? Do we **PRAY OR PAY** as was believed not so long ago, for our family or our bishop, in order to move them out of purgatory more quickly? Many years ago, my friend Diane and I hitchhiked through Europe, esp SW France to visit the small towns which still had their medieval Romanesque churches intact. I have always loved the lintels over the entry way. There are two distinct sides, left and right, which represent Heaven and Hell. On the right, people are writhing in Hell; there are devils with forked tails and pots of boiling oil. The left side shows a group of very pious people - their features looking suspiciously like the Fathers of the Church! They are standing or kneeling, and they are always deep in prayer for that is apparently what you do in Heaven! I have to admit, it always made Heaven look like a little dull!

SO now we get around to what I believe, namely that we make our own heaven and hell right here on earth. It can be for our-selves, our family, our friends.... Think of the ways you could make a hell out of someone else's life. I have done it, I shudder for it, am ashamed for it, and hope I apologized before the damage became permanent to either one of us. I have also done good deeds, such as when recently I gave a relative stranger a bouquet. She then told me, in great detail, why the past week had been so hard, and how the bouquet had made all the difference. It made all the difference to me too. I was giddy with joy!

And now for some more true stories:

A local store owner recently told me about a very distinguished looking, older gentleman who had come into her shop and was chatting away. He then divulged that he still had his childhood teddy bear and that he wanted it to be with him in his coffin when he died! A companion for the journey, I suppose. It reminded me of the ancient civilizations, such as Egyptian and Etruscan, who were buried with all their worldly goods and favorite foods to sustain them in the afterlife. And lucky for us they did, because otherwise we would know nothing about their civilizations at all.

My second story is about a garden helper I once had. He was a fragile sort of guy, who only worked for me because he lived near enough to walk. He could not bring himself to drive. One day he was visited by two Mormon missionaries, as I am sure we all have been. Their very first question was "do you attend a church?" And since his answer was no, they invited him to attend their church - they drove him there, put him on committees, made him feel useful. He loved it and was doing well until he was given a long list of the sins he must not commit, like smoke or drink coffee. Because if he did, he would go straight to hell. I was appalled, since this guy already had anxiety issues, and he suddenly became concerned that he might do one of those things by mistake, and be forever doomed. My only response was to ask him if any of these missionaries had ever been to heaven or hell, and come back to tell the tale? I am afraid that took care of his rather brief stint in the Mormon church!

And finally, there is sudden death, like when you are sitting in the break room at Walmart, talking with your colleagues about their weekend plans - and then you are not. Did you have a chance to re-examine your life, tidy up the loose ends, make your apologies? No, you did not. I'm not saying you have to live your life as if these were your last days on earth. I'm just sayin'.. Think about it.

So more true stories. Two of our guy friends died very suddenly in the middle of the night. In bed. In one case, his partner woke up in the morning, to find him there beside her, dead. In the other case, the husband felt funny in the middle of the night, after a wonderful day of partying with his entire family. The wife sent for an ambulance, but he could not be resuscitated, and everything immediately became SO complicated. No - they had not chosen a mortuary. No - he had not given her his passwords. No, he had not updated his will since his first marriage and his four children were born. Thus all these details fell upon the second wife - of 15 yrs - to resolve, and she once texted me, saying "Some days are really difficult. Yesterday was one of them when there is so much stupid stressful stuff to do. I'm crying, and it has nothing to do with grief. I started the probate process yesterday and the lawyer just had to rub in what a mess my husband had left me with. And then there are the little things that can go wrong and do go wrong. Like finding specialized batteries and filters that needed replacing, passwords that only he knew or kept changing without telling me."

And then there was hiring the lawyers - 2 for her, and 2 for his kids - to try to make sense of the outdated will. She does not want to make enemies of his children, but she needs to be able to survive, make the house payments, take the trips she must take to see the various professionals her husband worked with, all of whom thought he was a saint!!

Which reminds me, I do read local obits and come away thinking that none of them say "boy were we glad to be rid of that old buzzard!" No, they say "loving father, loving mother, loving husband" ... Just the kind of thing we want said about us. And maybe we should start living up to it, right now! It also reminds me of my favorite Giotto painting, where a king who was a horrid person, is lying on his pallet, on the brink of death. He looks up to heaven and says "Forgive me Lord," and as if by magic, a hand appears at the right top corner of the painting, and we assume the king has been forgiven, at the last moment, or at The Last Trumpet, as the composer, Handel would say.

I have now come to the end of my stories about death. They are all very down to earth with nothing spiritual because I am not a spiritual sort of person. It is all a mystery to me, which means I cannot explain it to you. With Joe's permission, I am going to tie this up with a mix of his words, Terry Eagleton's, and Rebecca's:

Starting with Terry Eagleton, an insightful Christian apologist:

"The New Testament is a brutal destroyer of human illusions. If you follow Jesus and don't end up dead, it appears you have some explaining to do. The stark signifier of the human condition is about one who spoke up for love and justice, and was put to death for his pains. The traumatic truth of human history is a mutilated body."

Joe says:

Those statements may sound radical, yet they are not so much different from Jesus himself who was crucified for being radical - who spoke with women, lepers, prostitutes, even a tax collector. And if he were alive today, would he not be crucified in some way or another? It is within the human realm to be Jesus-like, namely to follow Jesus. And it's a tall order.

And finally, what Rebecca said...

"Your image of God is what creates you. This is why it is important that we see God as loving and benevolent, and why good theology still matters. One mistaken image of God that keeps us from receiving grace is that God is a cruel tyrant. People who have been raised in an atmosphere of threats of punishment and promises of reward, are programmed to operate with this cheap image of a punitive God. It usually becomes their entire view of the universe.

When we pray for the suffering in our world, we need to be grateful that we even have that privilege. But what is also true is that, in measuring ourselves against the high-water mark that is Christ, we fall short, and guilt is the only appropriate response. Maybe we can be both guilty and grateful? This is the challenging news of the Gospel."

According to Plan A, that wd have been AMEN, except that just two days ago, I ran across a song by Sweet Honey in the Rock which I couldn't resist:

Those who have died have never, never left
The dead are not under the earth
They are in the rustling trees
They are in the groaning woods
They are in the crying grass
They are in the moaning rocks
The dead are not under the earth

AMEN