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The Gospel of Luke
LXIX. Crucified, Dead, and Buried
Luke 23:44-56

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We say it together every Sunday – that Jesus was “*crucified, dead, and buried.*” But while we have much to say about the fact that He was crucified, about how His death on the cross brought us salvation, we don’t really have much to say about the other two assertions in that clause of the Creed – that Jesus was also dead and buried. But what if the fact that Jesus was not just crucified, but also dead and buried, has something very important to tell us – not just about what Jesus did for us on that day – but also about what we can be assured Jesus will do for us when the day comes that we too shall be dead and buried?

If so, that would be a very powerful reassurance – because death frightens us. Not least because death is such a mystery to us, much like birth. Truly, we begin and end our lives in mystery. What exactly is it like to take our first breath, and what exactly will it be like to take our last? The first we do not remember; the second we dread and care not to think about. And while science can tell us the bodily facts of both, it can tell us little concerning the experience of our souls in either. And so we fear death. But what if the fact that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ experienced death Himself is able to tell us all we really need to know about dying, and to give to us all we really need to possess for our fears about death to be greatly eased?

For that is what our passage says: that Jesus Christ really died, and was really dead. He was not sort of dead, not mostly dead, not dead in a divine way different from the human way we shall one day be dead. He died our death. Which means, at the simplest level, that what we will one day go through, Jesus, our Lord and Savior, has already gone through before us. That where we shall one day be, He Himself has already been. But, even more than that, what this means – the great Biblical promise – is that because Jesus has died our death, because Jesus has already been exactly where we will one day be, therefore we can be assured that He will be there with us when we die. He has been where we will be – and therefore we may trust, say the Scriptures, that He will be there with us, for us and beside us, when our death comes.

And that is the strongest antidote to our fear of dying that I can imagine. If Jesus is going to be there – then in ways we can’t even yet imagine, it is going to be okay. “*Nothing can separate us from the love of God,*” writes Paul, not even death.¹ Jesus, who has been there before us, will be there with us when our day comes. “*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,*” writes David, “*I will fear no evil, for you are me.*”² Jesus, who has been there before us, will be there with us when our day comes. “*Where shall I go from your Spirit?*” writes the Psalmist, “*Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I*

make my bed in Sheol (the land of the dead), you are there!"³ Jesus, who has been there before us, will be there with us when our day comes.

And as a child is comforted and made unafraid by the presence of mom or dad in the midst of a fearful night, so shall we be comforted and made unafraid by His presence with us in that last fearful night. The fact that Jesus has died our death means that we no longer need to be afraid of dying. He will be there with us. We will see His face, we will hear His voice, we will feel His touch – and so shall be comforted as He leads us through the valley of the shadow of death into life once again.

I think that, in general, we need to be rather wary regarding accounts of life-after-death experiences – we must carefully consider the source, as well as what is revealed, for they are often both medically and theologically suspicious. But Henri Nouwen, one of the great teachers of the spiritual life, offers us something we can accept and trust – his own pre-death experience. The story is this: Nouwen was walking beside a busy road one day, when he was struck by the passenger side mirror of a passing vehicle. He was seriously injured, rushed to the hospital, rushed into emergency surgery. That initial surgery went well – or so everyone thought. But not too long after, Nouwen began failing rapidly. The doctors discovered something they had missed the first time around – that his spleen had been badly damaged. And they told Nouwen quite frankly that he was in great danger of not making it. As he was being prepped for his second emergency surgery, Nouwen says he suddenly found himself standing on the “portal of death,” as he called it. Suddenly considering the possibility that his life could be ending very soon. And as he lay there in his bed, waiting to go to surgery, he said he determined in that moment to try to meet this fact, and all of his fears about it, head-on and honestly. And this is his testimony to what he then experienced – the experience of a deeply Christian man in the face of death’s imminent possibility:

What I experienced then was something I had never experienced before: pure and unconditional love. Better still, what I experienced was an intensely personal presence, a presence that pushed all my fears aside and said, “Come, don’t be afraid. I love you.” A very gentle, non-judgmental presence; a presence that simply asked me to trust and trust completely . . . It was not a warm light, a rainbow, or an open door that I saw, but a human yet divine presence that I felt, inviting me to come closer and to let go of all my fears. My whole life had been an arduous attempt to follow Jesus as I had come to know him through my parents, friends, and teachers. I had spent countless hours studying the Scriptures, listening to lectures and sermons, and reading spiritual books. Jesus had been very close to me, but also very distant; a friend, but also a stranger; a source of hope, but also of fear, guilt, and shame. But now, when I walked around the portal of death, all ambiguity and all uncertainty were gone. He was there, the Lord of my life, saying, “Come to me, come! . . . Death lost its power and shrank away in the Life and Love which surrounded me . . .”⁴

Because Jesus was dead as we shall one day be dead, we can know that the promise of the 23rd Psalm is real: that He who has been there before us shall meet us in the valley of the shadow of death – and we will not be afraid. In fact, we need no longer be afraid of death even now – for where we shall one day be, He has already been; and where we shall one day be, He will on that day meet us there. And we, like Him, will be able in that moment to say, in faith and without fear: *“Into thy hands, I commit my spirit!”*

But there is more – because Jesus was not just dead, He was also buried. What does it mean for us that Jesus was buried in a tomb, a great rock rolled across the door? I think one of the best places to look for the meaning of Jesus’ burial is in the hearts and minds of the women who planned to go to the tomb after the Sabbath was over to properly anoint Jesus’ body for burial – since there hadn’t been time to do so before the Sabbath began. Actually, we can look in the hearts and minds of everyone who was there after Jesus died. The centurion who exclaimed that Jesus surely must have been innocent. The crowds who had watched the “spectacle,” as Luke puts it, who then went home beating their breasts in a sign of repentance and sorrow. And the women, followers of Jesus, who stood at a distance during His crucifixion. Because the one thing all of these different people had in common is that they all were sure that the story of Jesus had now ended. That it was now all over, finished, and done. That the death of Jesus was the final word on what had been, for a time, such an extraordinary and promising moment and movement. They all, alike, believed that the mission and ministry of Jesus had ended in failure. That dead is dead, and that buried in a tomb with a large stone rolled across the opening means it’s all over now. It’s all over. No hope left. End of the story. But they were wrong, weren’t they?

I know that thought leads us rather quickly on to the joy of the resurrection – but let’s not go there yet. Let’s stay a little longer in that seeming hopelessness, that seeming end of the story, that despair of Jesus being not just dead, but buried in the tomb. Because as death did that to Him, so life often does that to us – bury us in a tomb. Not just death – but life also can bury us in a tomb of despair, put us in a grave of anguish with seemingly no way out. Not just death, but life can bury us in sorrow, hopelessness, loneliness, sickness, and grief. A season of depression, an encounter with disease, the shock of some disaster. Dead-ends, desertions, divorces, denials. Losses piled upon losses. And then there we are with those women waiting with their spices and ointments, convinced that our story is over, that there is no way out, that there is no hope of a better tomorrow. Buried in a tomb formed of our own despair – just as Jesus was buried in that tomb hewed into the stone.

But because Jesus has been there, too – buried in the tomb – so we can be assured that He will always be with us in our tombs, also. It can be hard, sometimes, for us to sense His presence in the darkness – because the darkness of what we are going through can seem so dense and overwhelming. But that Jesus knows the tomb means that He always will find us and be with us in our tombs. We do not die alone – Jesus is with us. But neither do we live alone, neither do we suffer or grieve or hurt alone – because Jesus is always with us there, too. He knows what it is to be buried in death – such that He will come to us, find us, whenever we are buried by life!

I came across these words years ago – and they have meant so much to me. They are from a sermon by the post-war German preacher, Helmut Thielicke – speaking, no doubt, into the despair and hopelessness, the tomb, of post-war Germany:

Where we are too weak or too much in despair to reach out for the eternal hands, they hold us fast and catch us when we stumble. They reach out to us as they did to Peter when he was sinking into the waves. They reach out to us even . . . when everyone else forsakes us. They cradle my head when I can no longer do anything but groan . . . Death itself dare not come between us. I am that safely in his possession.

I have been given a security that shelters me now amid all turmoil and that will still be with me in the future when the Eternal Judge lays his robe aside and tells me as my Father, "Well done, good and faithful servant . . . enter into the joy of your master."⁵

But not just is Jesus with us in our living tombs to comfort us – so also, as the tomb could not hold Him, so it shall not be able to hold us who are with Him. Jesus is the One who made a way out of the dead-end of His own tomb – and Jesus is the One who will make for us a way out of what seems to us to be that dead-end of our own. Indeed, Jesus even has the capacity to make of our living tombs a growing place, a place of renewal and rebirth – a place of new strength borne out of our very weakness. Jesus is the One who will lead us out of that living tomb of despair into a new day, a new hope, a new joy, a new hold on life itself. What we suffer in life, not just in death, shall never be allowed to have the final word over us. The final word, as in all things, belongs to God. And that Word is grace. That Word is overcoming. That Word is God's power made manifest in our lives, even and perhaps especially in and through our suffering.

Stephen Hayner was a pastor, professor, and the President of our Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, when he was diagnosed with a very serious form of cancer – which, in the end, would claim his life. He and his wife Sharol kept a daily journal of their journey through this "land of cancer." This journal was later published, after Hayner's death, with the very telling and truthful title, Joy in the Journey – for amid the sorrow, suffering, fear, and illness of that living tomb of cancer, they did indeed receive the gift of God's tomb-defying joy.

This is the entry from the day before Hayner began his first chemotherapy treatment. He had been reading that morning from J. B. Phillips' translation of the New Testament, specifically Romans 5:1-5. Let me read Phillips' translation to you:

Since then it is by faith that we are justified, let us grasp the fact that we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through [Christ] we have confidently entered into this new relationship of grace, and here we take our stand, in happy certainty of the glorious things he has for us in the future.

This doesn't mean, of course, that we have only a hope of future joys – we can be full of joy here and now even in our trials and troubles. Taken in the right spirit these very things will give us patient endurance; this in turn will develop a mature character, and a character of this sort produces a steady hope, a hope that will

never disappoint us. Already we have some experience of the love of God flooding through our hearts by the Holy Spirit given to us.⁶

That is Paul. And, having read those verses, this is what Hayner then wrote in his journal the day before he began his chemotherapy:

These were great verses to wake up to this morning. Life is lived in the grace of Jesus through and through – whether the grace is obvious in our immediate circumstances or not. With Jesus at work in our lives, God’s “good” is always being done and we always continue to grow and to be transformed.

I realized this morning that the next chapter of this journey is the scariest part for me so far. It’s easier for me to think about dying than it is to think about feeling sick all the time – or having the quality of my life and ministry thoroughly compromised. And there are so many unknowns that come with chemotherapy.

*“Full of joy here and now even in our trials and troubles.”
That’s where I want to stand.⁷*

And because Jesus Christ knew for us also the tomb, because He was buried in death, even as we are sometimes buried by life, this is precisely where He enables us to stand, in life and in death: *“Full of joy here and now even in our trials and troubles.”*

Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who was not only crucified, but was also dead and buried – that His grace should find us, comfort us, raise us up and deliver us in all things and in all places. Until that day when we, too, are raised from the dead with Him, by Him, and for Him – to live beside Him forever.

¹ Romans 8:38-39.

² Psalm 23:4.

³ Psalm 139:7-8.

⁴ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Beyond the Mirror: Reflections on Death and Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), pp.35-36.

⁵ Helmut Thielicke, *I Believe: The Christians Creed* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 120.

⁶ Quoted in Steve & Sharol Hayner, *Joy in the Journey: Finding Abundance in the Shadow of Death* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 2015), pp. 38-39.

⁷ Hayner, p. 39.