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Sound and Fury, Signifying . . . Everything! John 20:1-18, I Cor. 15:12-20

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The title of my sermon, with one word altered, probably sounds vaguely familiar – some of you may have even pegged its source exactly. It is from Shakespeare, specifically Act V, Scene 5 of his play Macbeth. My favorite course in college was a class on Shakespeare, taught by an extraordinarily gifted professor named Dr. Cynthia Lewis. Some years ago, I wrote her an email telling her how much her class had meant to me, and how grateful I was to have had her as a teacher. She responded graciously – but she also asked me if I had had much occasion to use Shakespeare in my sermons. I'm afraid my honest response to her question probably depressed her. So, Dr. Lewis, my sermon title this morning is for you!

But my use of Shakespeare in my title this morning is more than a nod to a brilliant teacher. I use it primarily because it speaks to us, through the centuries, of a question which is still very much with us. You'll hear it better if I give you a little more of the quote. Macbeth, pondering life and the inescapability of death, says:

*Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to a dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.¹*

“Full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Have we not, in some idle hour, in some moment of heightened fear and worry, thought that same thought? Pondered that same question of whether any of this – life itself – whether any of it is ever more than just one thing after another, sound and fury, signifying . . . Well, signifying what exactly? Does any of it add up to anything more than the march of days and then we die?

Or maybe it is Shakespeare's use of “sound and fury” which throws us off. Sound and fury certainly fits the telling of Macbeth's story – but perhaps in our days, in our lives, what makes us ponder most deeply over whether our lives have any deeper significance, any higher meaning or purpose or plan beyond just one thing after another and then we die, is the fact that our lives have

so little sound and fury to them. The fact that our lives are, for the most part, so routine, so repetitive, so arbitrary. We're busy people, to be sure, with a lot on our plates daily – but how much of that busy-ness is just the same ordinary things happening over and over, nothing really changing, no sense of higher purpose or greater meaning as one day yields to the next. Henri Nouwen, in his classic book, *Making All Things New* – a book I read over again every year or so, describes our dilemma in this way. It's a long quote, but worth it. See if you hear something of your life, yourself in this:

Beneath our worrying lives, however, something else is going on. While our minds and hearts are filled with many things, and we wonder how we can live up to the expectations imposed upon us by ourselves and others, we have a deep sense of unfulfillment. While busy with and worried about many things, we seldom feel truly satisfied, at peace, or at home. A gnawing sense of being unfulfilled underlies our filled lives. Reflecting a little more on this experience of unfulfillment, I can discern different sentiments. The most significant are boredom, resentment, and depression.

Boredom is a sentiment of disconnectedness. While we are busy with many things, we wonder if what we do makes any real difference. Life presents itself as a random and unconnected series of activities and events over which we have little or no control. To be bored, therefore, does not mean that we have nothing to do, but that we question the value of the things we are so busy doing. The great paradox of our time is that many of us are busy and bored at the same time. While running from one event to the next, we wonder in our innermost selves if anything is really happening. While we can hardly keep up with our many tasks and obligations, we are not so sure that it would make any difference if we did nothing at all . . . In short, while our lives are full, we feel unfulfilled.²

“Full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” – or “Full of busyness and boredom, signifying what, if anything at all?” Life, if we are living with any degree of self-awareness at all, raises that question for us again and again. It's even Biblical, this question. King Solomon, the wisest of the kings, ponders this question through the entire book of Ecclesiastes. He writes in chapter one: “I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven . . . I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.”³ Cheerful fellow, huh?

But even if we somehow avoid the question of life's deeper meaning and purpose and ultimate value during our years of sound and fury, routine and repetition, death makes this question inescapable. It is, in fact, the death of his wife, the queen, which prompts Macbeth's soliloquy that life but “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” And it is the death of someone we love, or the nearing of our own dying – if nothing else – which inescapably prompts that question within us, no matter how we have otherwise avoided it. A life we have loved is now gone, and we cannot help but seek to find a way to say that this life mattered, and will matter to us still. It is popular these days to call a funeral a “Celebration of Life” – we Presbyterians don't do

that, by the law – to call it a “Celebration of Life” and so to fill the funeral with funny stories and fond memories which seek to accomplish just that – to say that this life signified something worth celebrating. But I find, as a pastor, that these “celebrations” don’t really work – because no matter how joyful such a celebration tries to be, such celebration does nothing to counter the reality of our loss. The reality that this life is ended and gone from us. We may keep the memory of that life alive for a generation or two, even carve something memorable upon the gravestone for generations yet to come. But in the end, our efforts are in vain. As the Psalmist says,

*As for man, his days are like grass;
he flourishes like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.⁴*

So death, if nothing else, leaves us grappling with Macbeth’s lament: is this brief life and seemingly all-erasing power of death the last and final word? The question of whether all of this, in the end, signifies anything more than just sound and fury, routine and repetition, and then the forgottenness of the grave? Does who we are, how we live, what we do, how we love make any final difference at all, matter at all?

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“*Sound and fury, signifying nothing.*” There was a lot of sound and fury in the last week of Jesus’ earthly life. The raucous, cheering crowd of Palm Sunday soon become the raucous, jeering crowd of Good Friday. And then suddenly it was all over. Because Jesus was dead. Dead and laid in a stone-sealed tomb. For three days following His death, the women and the disciples must have been pondering our question: is this all there is? Is this all that it has come down to, all that it now adds up to – Jesus in a grave? The last three years they had spent with Him, splendidly full of so many wondrous words and works, now all having come down to this – to death. To nothing. To an ending which seemed to upend and negate everything that had happened, everything they had come to believe over those last three years? After Jesus’ burial, on the road to Emmaus one disciple gives voice to what they all must have been thinking: “*But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.*”⁵ But with Jesus dead and sealed in a tomb, that hope could be no more. In the end, or so it seemed, it had all just been sound and fury, in the end signifying that nothing had changed, and that nothing ever would.

And it was in that spirit, surely, that the women approached the tomb on Easter morning. There had been so much sound and fury on Good Friday that they hadn’t even had time to prepare His body properly – and they were going to the tomb to finish that work. One last celebration of His life, if you will, before they moved on, moved back into their old lives. But when they got to the tomb, the stone had been rolled away – which set off a whole new round of sound and fury. Mary races back to tell the disciples what she has found, and to offer the only possible explanation for what she has seen – that someone had come in the night and stolen His body. One last insult added to the injury of His death. Peter and John then go racing off to see for themselves – men will be men, I suppose, because they turn it into a competition over who can get there first. John wins the race, but Peter makes sure to assert his superior disciple status by being the first to actually go into the tomb. And there they find it just as Mary had said. And then they head back, convinced

that indeed one last insult has been added to the injury of His death. And their hearts, already broken, somehow found a way to break still more. Just more sound and fury, signifying nothing.

But Mary lingers at the tomb, weeping. Looking in a second time, she sees two angels within, though she doesn't recognize them as such. They ask her why she is weeping, and she explains through tears what she is sure has happened – that somehow has stolen His body. And having said this, she turns to leave – only to find another man standing behind her. She assumes he must be the gardener, and that perhaps then he would know what has happened. But it is not the gardener at all, but rather the Lord of the Garden Himself. *“Woman, why are you weeping?”* He says to her. She repeats her theory and her plea. But then the Gardener calls her by name – and suddenly, in that moment, she sees Him, she recognizes Him, and she rushes to embrace Him. She hears Him call her by name and suddenly she sees that it really is Him. And that He is – but how can this possibly be?! – she sees that He is no longer dead, but raised from the dead. Jesus, alive, standing before her, calling her by name – His divine and wondrous love, surely, conveyed in the very way He pronounces it.

He then gives her instructions for the disciples, which she then dutifully carries out. But in her heart – surely it is so – in her heart is not a sense of duty, but a joy so broad, so deep, so high, that her heart can scarce contain it. Jesus Christ is raised from the dead. Jesus is no longer dead; He is alive again. And because of this, because of this – His life now signifies everything! He is risen from the dead – and therefore everything about life, everything about death, everything about everything that He had said and done is now utterly changed! For Mary, for the disciples, here today for you and for me and for all who believe. Life may still be filled with sound and fury, still may be overfilled with routine and repetition – but no longer is any of it without meaning and purpose! No longer does it all add up to nothing when we die. Because Jesus Christ is raised from the dead, it all matters now, it all has purpose and meaning now, it all is filled with a significance that death can never destroy. For because He lives, now we shall live also.

Paul did his best to try to capture what the Resurrection means for us and for the meaning of our days: *“If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins”* (sound and fury). *“Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished”* (signifying nothing). *“But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”* Meaning death does not have the final word any longer. Death no longer cancels our lives, but serves merely as a portal to our life's fulfillment in the perfection and greater joy of the Kingdom of Heaven. Death no longer reduces us to the status of Macbeth's *“brief candle,”* blown out and quickly forgotten. Now all death can do to us is to deliver us into greater life – the exclamation point upon the life we have here lived, insuring that we shall never be forgotten because we, like Christ, are now alive forevermore. In Revelation 14, in fact, we hear God speaking from the throne of heaven: *“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. Blessed indeed, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors and their works follow them.”*⁶ Death can no longer defeat us, negate us, erase us. Because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, so shall we be. And death no longer empties our lives of their meaning, no longer writes the epitaph of “signifying nothing” upon our life's story – for our works, who we are, now follows us from this life into the next.

Which means also that the life we are living right here and right now matters, is of great significance for both today and forever. There is a wonderful little note in John's account of the resurrection. That before Jesus leaves the tomb into the new day dawning, He takes His graveclothes and carefully folds them, then places them in their proper place. What better way of telling us that the dailiness of our lives matters to Him – even doing the laundry! That the routine and repetition of our days, every moment of our every day, are now filled with significance, even down to the smallest detail – because the life we are living we now live with the risen Christ beside us, before us, within us, and beckoning us onward. Even the smallest things we do each day now matter, even something as small as giving a cup of cold water to someone who is thirsty – Jesus Himself used that example to teach us this.⁷ To teach us that even the smallest of our daily acts are now taken up into God's plan, taken up into God's eternity. None of it will be lost – and looking back from heaven, we will see that none of what we have done in His name and for His sake has been in vain. Instead we now do what we do, see the meaning in all that we do, because we are now living in anticipation of that day when we shall be raised up from death and brought before the throne – forgiven, washed clean, and made whole – that glorious day when we will hear Him say to us, *“Well done, good and faithful servant.”*⁸

This is the great Good News of Easter morning, this Easter morning. Jesus Christ is risen. Which means death is no longer an ending, but a new beginning. Which means that life here and now today, whether full of sound and fury or routine and repetition, life here and now no longer signifies nothing. Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, every moment now has meaning, every word and deed now has value, every new day now has purpose. *“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”* And brothers and sisters in Christ, that truth signifies everything!

¹ Macbeth, Act V, Scene 5, lines 22-31.

² Henri J. M. Nouwen, Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), pp. 28-30.

³ Ecclesiastes 1:13-14.

⁴ Psalm 103:15-16.

⁵ Luke 24:21.

⁶ Revelation 14:13.

⁷ Matthew 10:42.

⁸ Matthew 25:21, 23.