

March 22, 2026

**The Gospel of John**  
**LIV. Crucified, Dead, and Buried**  
**John 19:31-42**

Dr. William P. Seel  
Easley Presbyterian Church  
Easley, South Carolina

Thomas Lynch, the nationally-known poet and writer whose day job is that of a funeral director at the family funeral home in his small Michigan hometown, tells of going to pick up the body of a friend who had died in the night:

*But this morning George Horton is really dead and he's really being removed from his premises by Matt and me . . . And it's really a shame, all things considered, because here's George, more or less in his prime, just south of sixty, his kids raised, his house paid off . . . And he's a scratch golfer and a small business owner with reliable employees and frequent flier miles . . . And he has his money tucked into rental homes and mutual funds, and a host of friends who'd only say good things about him, and a daughter about to make him a grandfather for the first time, and really old George seemed to have it made, and except for our moving him feet first down the stairs this morning, he has everything to live for, everything.*

*And it is there, on the landing of the first floor, only a few feet from the front door out, that his very pregnant daughter waits in her warmup suit to tender her goodbyes . . . And Matt's face is flushed with the lifting, the huffing and puffing, or the weight of it all, or the sad beauty of the woman as she runs her hand along her father's cheek, and she is catching her breath and her eyes are red and wet and she lifts her face to ask me, "Why?"*

*"His heart, Nancy . . ." is what I tell her. "It looks like he just slept away. He never felt a thing." These are the well-tested comforts one learns after twenty-five years of doing these things.*

*"But why?" she asks me [again], and now it is clear that how it happened is not good enough . . .*

*. . . She wants to know why in the much larger, Overwhelming Question sense: why we don't just live forever. Why are we all eventually orphaned and heartbroken? Why we human beings cease to be. Why our nature won't leave well enough alone. Why we are not all immortal. Why this morning? Why George Horton? Why oh why oh why?<sup>1</sup>*

Death is the great dark reality which overshadows all of human life. Over and against all our strength, all our accomplishment, all our knowledge stands the cruel mockery of death – taunting us, laughing at us, and ultimately claiming us, each and every one. No wonder we speak so little about death; no wonder we push away thoughts of our own mortality with a thousand daily distractions. But, even so, from time to time, something happens to someone we love or our guard slips – and the thought of death enters anyway. And in that moment we know, we discern one dreadful, disturbing thing – how deeply afraid we are of death.

What exactly do we fear about death? It would be easy to say “everything” and be done with it. But let’s not, not this morning. We fear death’s power of negation. Death is the enemy of all that is positive; it is the undoing of all that is virtuous and loving and good. Death negates all that we have striven to be. One writer puts it this way: *“If death waits at the end of our lives to end them, it cancels not just the next day nor just the continuance of living: it swallows the whole life, even back to its beginning. Suddenly we are not, as though we never had been.”*<sup>2</sup> Or, as the Psalmist puts it:

*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.*<sup>3</sup>

We fear death’s isolation. Death is the ultimate abandonment, the ultimate bringer of loneliness. Death cuts us off from those whom we love in ways that are devastating and absolute. St. Augustine, the great early church teacher, speaks for all of us in his lament over the death of his closest friend:

*My heart was black with grief. Whatever I looked on had the air of death. My native place was a prison-house and my home a strange unhappiness. The things we had done together became sheer torment without him. My eyes were restless looking for him, but he was not there. I hated all places because he was not in them . . . [T]he cruelest enemy, that death which had taken him from me.*<sup>4</sup>

We fear death’s chaos. We labor hard to maintain control over the daily circumstances of our lives – or, at least, to maintain the illusion of such. And we think: if only I exercise, eat right, invest wisely, and live carefully – I can beat death. But death comes anyway, regardless of all our plans and precautions – and brings with it a loss of control. Death unleashes the forces of chaos into our lives, as well as into our hearts. And all our well-ordered plans are turned on end; all our thoughtfully arranged itineraries are blown to pieces. One grieving father said it well: *“Death isn’t on any of our maps; death is what punches holes in all our maps.”*<sup>5</sup>

We fear death’s finality. We fear the fact that death is so truly and utterly an ending. So many things get left undone, so many dreams left unfulfilled and so many projects left incomplete. And no more second chances to put wrong things right, no more opportunities to start over again. As our Biblical friend Job puts it:

*For there is hope for a tree,  
 if it be cut down, that it will sprout again,  
 and that its shoots will not cease.  
 Though its root grow old in the earth,  
 and its stump die in the soil,  
 yet at the scent of water it will bud  
 and put out branches like a young plant.  
 But a man dies and is laid low;  
 man breathes his last, and where is he?  
 As waters fail from a lake  
 and a river wastes away and dries up,  
 so a man lies down and rises not again . . .<sup>6</sup>*

We fear death's unknowns. How will our death come upon us – what will be its cause? When will death come upon us – will we have time to prepare or will it be unexpected and sudden? And what will death itself be like? What will it actually be like to feel our bodies fail, our minds grow slack? Will we be able to die a good death with dignity and with loved ones gathered around? What will it be like to die? We are so terribly afraid of death.

*Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave  
 Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;  
 Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.  
 I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.<sup>7</sup>*

You and I fear death. And our fear of death is the ultimate fear, for death is the ultimate threat, the ultimate enemy – and not just to our life, but also to our faith. For if the Christian faith cannot answer our fear of death, if the Gospel cannot adequately address the fact of our dying, then of what use is it? Death serves to “*press the noses of the faithful against the windows of their faith,*” as one theologian puts it.<sup>8</sup> What, then, shall we see – what, then, do we see – when death and the fear of death presses our noses up against the windows of our faith in Jesus? How does the Gospel answer our ultimate fear?

With two great promises – two great reassurances. The first is found in those words we say together every Sunday: “*He was crucified, dead, and buried.*”<sup>9</sup> The first answer the Gospel gives to our fear of death is not mere words of good cheer and happy encouragement, but with the surprising and yet profound assurance that death is not only our enemy, but that death is also the enemy of the God of Life – the God of our lives. For Jesus Christ, God in human form was crucified; and He was dead; and He was buried – our God dead and buried just like us. What death does to us, death did to Him. He died the very same death that we die. He became dead the very same way we will one day be dead. And so the Gospel tells us that death matters as much to the God of Life as it does to us – because God came down to earth in human form to take upon Himself our death. All that He might know for Himself what our death is. And all that He might, in so doing, empty death of its threat to us, all that He might overcome death's power over us once and for all. All so that we would not need to be afraid of death anymore.

He was crucified, dead, and buried. God didn't just sit up in heaven, distant above our fear and suffering. He came down not just to live as we live – to know our life; but also to die as we die – to know our death. That in Him we might find the remedy to our fear of death; that in Him we might find a reason no longer to tremble before death; that in Him we might find something – Someone – greater, more powerful even than death.

For the fact that Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried means that now we – indeed – need no longer fear dying. For the fact that Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried means that now we no longer will face death alone. The first promise, the first reassurance that our faith gives us in the face of death is this: that Jesus has died our death means that Jesus will now be present to us in our dying. Because He has already been where we shall one day be – therefore we can be reassured by His promise that He will be there with us when our time comes. And as a child is comforted in the midst of a fearful, nightmare night by the strong and reassuring presence of a loving and devoted parent, so we will find that the presence of Jesus will meet us in our dying – He will take us by the hand and take us to where we are going, driving out our every fear by the shining light and all-encompassing love of His protecting presence. We will not die alone. We will die with Him at our side, present and close to us in a way we cannot now even begin to imagine. Because Jesus has died our death, death can no longer separate us from the Love of God – and that Love will meet us in death and drive away all our fears:

*Yea though I walk through the valley  
of the shadow of death,  
I will fear not evil,  
for thou art with me,  
thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.<sup>10</sup>*

*“For thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.”* Because Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried, so shall our dying be – *“I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.”* We need no longer be afraid of dying anymore – Jesus will be with us when that moment comes. And it will be okay. It will be okay.

As a pastor I have been privileged to see the reality of this first promise of God in the face of our death with my own eyes so many times. Insofar as one can see the presence of Jesus come into one who is dying and drive out their fear, I have seen it. I will testify to it with one hand upon a Bible and the other upon my own heart. For example, there was a dear woman in one of the previous churches I have served. Her name was Abbie. Abbie had lived all her life in a state of constant nervous agitation. Her life had not always been an easy one, especially in her younger days – so I suppose she came well by that anxiety. But all the days I knew her, she lived in a state of constant fear – trembling before every possible misfortune her mind could imagine, no matter how far-fetched or remote it might be. Life just made her tremble, scared her so much that it made it hard for her sometimes to enjoy all the good things that had come her way.

And then, one day, that dreaded, awful thing she had been fearing most actually showed up in the form of terminal cancer. I confess I was deeply worried that she was just going to go to pieces. I had no idea how this agitated, nervous, frightened soul was ever going to be able to face what lay ahead. But face it she did. In fact, what happened was that a most amazing transformation

came over her as she faced it. She was still herself, and yet she became completely changed. Somehow that lifelong habit of perpetual anxiety disappeared, almost overnight. The trembling, the nervousness, the fear, the tortured imaginings – all of it just gone. And in their place, complete and utter peace. To visit with her on her death bed was to enter into a holy temple of tranquility and trust.

And so one day I asked her about this transformation, as tactfully as I could – just asked her how and why, and now of all times, she had come to be so at peace. She responded by reciting to me the opening lines of the Twenty-third Psalm: *“The Lord is my shepherd . . .”* Then she said that after she had received her diagnosis she had gone home, tearful and terrified, and opened up her Bible. She had almost instinctively turned to Psalm 23 and just started reading it over and over: *“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and staff, they comfort me.”* And as she was reading those words, she said, she just felt the most extraordinary peace come over her. She said she could feel her body relaxing as she read, and her mind slowing down. And she said she could hear Jesus speaking to her – saying to her, *“Abbie, I will be with you. There’s no need for you to be afraid anymore.”*

And she said that’s when she knew, more surely and passionately than she had ever known anything before in her life, that this was the truth. And that is what happened. She went through the valley hand-in-hand with her Lord. He met her there, and He led her safely through. And her death was one of the most peaceful, unafraid, healing and hopeful and beautiful of any I have ever witnessed. Jesus’ death was just like ours – which means, indeed, that He will be there with us when our moment comes. And really, truly, profoundly, with Jesus beside us, there really will be no need for us to be afraid.

But, of course, that Jesus Christ was crucified, dead, and buried means one thing more for our fear of death – the second promise, the second profound reassurance for us in light of our fear of death. The promise that, in and through Jesus, our death is not an ending only, but also a new and glorious beginning. Not an exit only, but also an entrance; not a lying down only, but also an eternal rising up. But let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves, too far ahead of John’s Gospel this morning. Instead, let’s end where John ends this morning – with a powerful hint of that second promise, a powerful hint of what is to come. Of what follows Jesus’ death and burial – and therefore of what shall follow our own. Let us hint at this the same way John hints at it in our reading. I promise you we will make it plain on Easter morning.

Note how John begins our passage: *“Since it was the day of Preparation . . .”* And note how he ends our passage: *“So because of the Jewish day of Preparation . . .”* The day of Preparation was why the bodies had to be taken down and buried quickly – preparation for the Sabbath day, even more the preparation for the annual observance of the Passover. But we know, as John knew – that this particular day of Preparation was going to turn out to be a Preparation for something far greater than the Sabbath, far greater than even the Passover celebration. It was the day of Preparation for a joy so unexpected, so glorious, so once and for all death defeating and fear of death defying – well, let’s leave it there for now. As I said, Easter is coming – and then, with John, we will make that second promise, that second assurance plain.

Let's leave with this: that we truly need no longer be afraid of death – because of Jesus. Because of the fact that Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried. For that means that we now die into His arms, enter death with Him with beside us. His perfect love for us casting out every last bit of fear from our hearts.<sup>11</sup> And meaning also that the day of our death, just like the day of His – whenever it shall come, however it shall come – the day of our death shall be but a day of preparation for something more – for something much, much more.

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Lynch, Bodies in Motion and at Rest: On Metaphor and Mortality (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), pp. 32-34.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Wangerin, Jr., Reliving the Passion (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), pp. 115-116.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 103:15-16.

<sup>4</sup> From The Confessions, 4.4-6, quoted in Peter Kreeft, Love Is Stranger Than Death (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), p. 107.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in J. Gerald Janzen, "Walking Through the Valley of the Shadow of Death," The Living Pulpit, Vol. 7, No. 3 (July – September, 1998), p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Job 14:7-12.

<sup>7</sup> Edna St. Vincent Millay, lines from "Dirge Without Music."

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Lynch, The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), p. 80.

<sup>9</sup> From The Apostles' Creed.

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 23:4.

<sup>11</sup> I John 4:18.