Title: Whistling Past the Graveyard

Scripture: John 11:1-45

Date: Palm Sunday, March 19-20, 2016

I sat very still. I may have been rocking back and forth a little. I don’t know. I held his hand. It was as still as I have ever felt. The life was gone. I touched his face. I could still feel the scratchy stubble of his beard. He was cool for the first time in awhile. He looked like he was asleep.

I had been there just two days before, when he was lying on his side, padded and propped by pillows, breathing with the aid of a powered respirator. His eyes were closed, but his chest rose and fell as air was forced into his lungs. I held his hand then. And I told him that he didn’t have to worry about Mom. That he and I had talked about where the important papers were and he had told me that he wanted Mom to stay in Florida for awhile near their friends. He didn’t want her to make any life-changing decisions for awhile because he knew they would be panic decisions. I confirmed all that for him. He had tried to open his eyes and I saw them flutter and for the briefest second one eye opened and I saw it open and I said, “Dad, I know you hear me because I just saw your eye open. And I know you love me and you love Mom and Betty. But now I want you to use all your strength to kill this infection that is troubling you. We are all here for you and we love you. But no matter what happens, you’ve told us how to go on.”

But now I sat there for the longest time just certain that any moment his eyes would blink open and look at me, his friendly grin would light up his face. But it never happened. There was no movement. No fluttering eyes. No loving smile. Just quiet, cold, unmoving death.

I think of my Dad often, although he has been dead for almost thirty-four years now. I find myself thinking, “Dad sure would have liked to be here to see his great grandchildren. He sure would have enjoyed that movie. He would have loved to see that golf tournament. He really would have loved my new car.”

He is in my dreams often. Although he is dead, he is still with me. I will carry him as a part of me forever. I would rather have him here, alive. But I am slowly making peace with death. And I am making peace with the knowledge that I will see him again when I die. Then, I think, he will be hail and hearty, robust and active, as he was when he was here. For now, I content myself with dreams.

Today is Palm Sunday. Today, Holy Week begins, ending next Sunday with Easter. But It is not Easter yet. The problem is that we have to walk through a graveyard to get there. Those who don’t have the stomach for graveyard walking will stay home right on through Good Friday. We won’t see them until Easter morning, ready to celebrate with trumpets, bells, choirs, and alleluias. The rest of us will just hang on to each other as we slip past the tombs and gravestones, maybe whistling a feeble tune, telling each other every resurrection story we can think of.

When I was a kid, there was a cemetery in town. I walked past it nearly every day, on the way to school, on the way home. Did you know that if you whistle while you pass a graveyard that the ghosts will think you aren’t afraid and they’ll leave you alone? My friends and I knew that. It was common knowledge, stuff that you just knew when you were a kid.

But we knew something else about graveyards, something intuitive, something instinctive. We knew graveyards held death. Death was cold, dark, permanent, scary. All you had to do was touch the cold, damp granite of one of those headstones and you knew that death was cold. It held the keys to a terror so profound that you couldn’t even speak of it. As we would walk past that graveyard our conversation would die off, things would get quiet, and each of us would become lost for a moment in our own thoughts. Before long, there would be a little, thready, wobbly tune whistled in the air. The rest of us would join in. That broke the power of the graveyard. It reminded us that we were, for now, beyond the graveyard’s reach.

Maybe that’s why I thought of John’s story about Lazarus on this Palm Sunday. It is our assurance that there is a power loose in the universe that is stronger than death, stronger even than our fear of death, a power which calls us out of our stinking tombs into the fullness and sweet mystery of life.

Bethany was a dangerous place for Jesus to be in those days. Just two miles from Jerusalem, it was in easy reach of the people who had tried to stone him just days before. Jesus had escaped them and slipped across the Jordan, when word reached him that his friend Lazarus was ill. His journey was delayed, and when he finally arrived, Lazarus had been dead for days and Jesus had missed the funeral.

“Come and see,” someone had said, with all the formal tact of a funeral director. “Come and see the body so it will be real for you, so you can accept the death that has happened. Come and touch the stubbly face and hold the cold hand.” But it was already very real for Jesus, and he did not accept it at all. “Lazarus, come out,” he cried in a loud voice, and Lazarus did, trailing his bandages behind him like a muffler he no longer needed. “Unbind him,” Jesus said, “and let him go.”

Barbara Brown Taylor is one of my favorite preachers. She says she cannot hear this story of Lazarus without thinking of her friend Matilda, who died a few years ago. Matilda had Lou Gehrig’s disease, which means that she gradually lost control of all her muscles. Her face went first, then her vocal chords, then her legs. For the last year of her life, she communicated by writing on a slate, one of those erasable things that kids play with. Sometimes, she says, Matilda would get so excited that she would write and erase faster than anyone could read.

Barbara says that Matilda found a lot to be excited about—watercolors, for instance. When she could not talk anymore, she taught herself to paint, until her kitchen walls were papered with tulips, peonies, daffodils, and hibiscus. When you visited Matilda, you painted. That was one of the rules. She said it did not matter if you had no ability, if the last time you held a brush was to put a coat of latex on the bathroom wall, Matilda stuck a paintbrush in your hand, shoved a plastic egg carton full of colors in front of you, and you painted. The best part, she says, was afterwards, when she admired your work, sticking her thumb in the air and rewarding you with her loose, drooling grin.

It was all I could do, Barbara says, to watch Matilda die. She says I wanted someone to walk into her room with a pill or a prayer that would cure her illness or at least stop its progress, but even if that had happened—even if Jesus himself had showed up to call her from her tomb—she would have been a rescue from death instead of a triumph over it, a resuscitation rather than a resurrection.

Something bigger than that was going on with Matilda. Barbara said that every time Matilda lost something she thought she could not live without, she found out she could. First there was a painful void that lasted an hour, a day, a week. Then something new moved in to fill the empty place: fresh series of paintings, a new friend, a deeper sense of the presence of God. “He is calling me,” she wrote on her slate one day, “like a bridegroom calling his bride.”

Her resurrection began before she died and everyone around her saw it. When she set her cup down it was empty. There was nothing wasted, nothing left over to spill or lament. She died clean as a whistle, and several of the people who sat by her bed that day say their fear of death died with her. Having watched her do it, they believe they can do it too.

Lord, I believe, but help thou my unbelief, because I still do not want to die. I believe Jesus had power to raise the dead, only I do not want him practicing on me. I want a God who will cut my losses and cushion my failures, a God who will grant me a life free from pain. I want a God who will rescue me from death, who will delete it from the human experience and find some other way to operate. That’s what I want.

But what I, and what all of us, have instead is a God who is with us through our death experience and who then resurrects us from the dead. Our God puts an end to death by working through it instead of around it— creating life in the midst of grief, creating love in the midst of loss, creating faith in the midst of despair— resurrecting us from our big and little deaths, opening our personal tombs, showing us by his own example that the only road to Easter morning runs smack through Good Friday.

*A Second Helping of Chicken Soup for the Soul* is a collection of wonderful stories and among them is this story from John Wayne Schlatter. He says his mother had no fear of death and neither does he. Her father had been a preacher and she told the story of her experience as an eight-year-old in a funeral parlor. Her father picked her up and took her over to the wall of the room and asked her to feel the wall. “What does that feel like?” he asked.

“Well, it’s hard and cold.”

Then he carried her over to the casket and said, “I’m going to ask you to do the most difficult thing I’ll ever ask. But if you do it, you’ll never be afraid of death again. I want you to put your hand on Mrs. Smith’s face.”

Because she loved and trusted her father, she did what he asked. “Well?” asked her father.

“Daddy, it feels like the wall.”

“That’s right,” he said. “This is her old house and our friend, Mrs. Smith, has moved. There’s no reason to be afraid of an old house.”

That lesson took root and grew and just a few hours before his mother died, Schlatter reports that she made a most unusual request. As her family stood around fighting back tears, she said, “Don’t bring any flowers to my grave because I won’t be there. When I get rid of this body, I’m flying to Europe. Your father would never take me.”

The room erupted in laughter and there were no more tears for the rest of the night. That morning, he received a call that his mother had begun her flight to Europe.

As he was going through his mother’s things later on, he came across a packet of his mother’s writings. As he opened the packet, one piece of paper fell to the floor. It was a poem.

*When I die, give what is left of me to children.*

*If you need to cry, cry for your brothers walking beside you.*

*Put your arms around anyone and give them what you need to give to me.*

*I want to leave you with something, something better than words or sounds.*

*Look for me in the people I have known and loved.*

*And if you cannot live without me, then let me live on in your eyes, your mind, and your acts of kindness.*

*You can love me most by letting hands touch hands and letting go of children that need to be free.*

*Love does not die, people do.*

*So when all that is left of me is love . . .*

*Give me away . . .*

“I am the resurrection and the life,” Jesus says to grieving Martha. Not “I will be,” but “I am”—right here, right now—”I am” resurrection and life for anyone willing to believe that it just might be true. It is not a safe story, but it is a strong one, with power to lead us through the graveyard and out the other side. So let us hang onto each other as we walk through the graveyard together, whistle a feeble tune, and tell every resurrection story we can think of.

You may have deep inside you a fear of death, a fear of funerals, a revulsion of the whole process of death. You may be like I used to be… never willing to go to a funeral, to approach a casket, to see someone I had known lying still like Lazarus, wrapped in graveclothes.

If that describes you, then I have a message for you… Jesus is resurrection and life for you this very minute. And no matter how frightened you are of death, He will walk with you. He will hold your hand as you approach the casket, as you touch the stubbly beard or cold hand, he will ride with you to the graveside and he will hold you as the empty shell is placed in the ground.

And with His perfect power, He will transform that death into a new life, a life that will dazzle and glitter and shine. And the beauty of that moment will transcend anything you have ever known. All you need to do to rid yourself of that fear is choose to believe in Him. And He will lead you past the graveyard and out the other side. If you want to choose Jesus right now, just pray this prayer in your heart as I pray it…

*Jesus, I believe. Help my unbelief. Cast out my doubts. Fill me with the courage of faith in you. Help me know that at the end of this journey is the glory of resurrection, the delight of life forever with you. No more suffering, no more hardship, no more tears. Just love, pure and complete and total love, showering down on me, flooding over me, filling me, completing me. Glorious, shining, radiant love. Your love. Remind me of that as I walk through this week’s graveyard. Thank you for your love and for your grace, without which I am lost. Now, having found you, I surrender my fears to you. Fill me with your love. I ask in your holy name, Jesus. Amen.*