

One of the blessings of working at this site during the week is that I allow myself a break every now and then to walk the trail that exists here on the church property. It starts over here beside the playground and winds itself through the woods and ends up at the African-American slave cemetery over here where it circles around the cemetery. This trail exists due to the work of a couple of scouts completing their Eagle projects and the tireless work of George Meyer who has made it his mission to restore the cemetery.

I find walking this trail to be more than exercise but a spiritual experience because it ends up at the markings of graves of long ago residents of this area who were brought here against their will to work the land and to build parts to this church. As I walk the route around the graveyard I try to imagine what it must have been like in the 1850s when friends and relatives gathered to bury the deceased individual. What did they feel? What did they say at the funeral? What was it like to bury someone who was a slave to someone else?

Traditional African religion has an interesting way of dealing with the details of life after death. Typically, there is a belief that when you die, you continue to live on in the memory of those who remain in life on earth. The ancestors continue to remember the deceased through special ceremonies and private devotion. When the point in time is reached when there is no one around to remember you, then the deceased passes into a new stage in which they are fully and finally dead. There is no concept of eternal life. You live on only as long as there are living people to remember you.

There is a novel called "The Recent History of the Dead" which develops this theme. In this book, people who die are not in heaven but in a kind of purgatory in which they are preparing for the next stage. There is hopeful optimism in this stage, sometimes marked by the religious faith people brought with them, sometimes marked by a faith acquired in this stage. People have jobs, go to coffee shops and movie theatres, play pool, and live in various living arrangements. They do not age. However, when they are no longer remembered by people on earth, they disappear.

As most of us know, this is Memorial Day weekend. Memorial Day is a day set up to remember those men and women who have died while bravely serving our country in the military. Although most of us today think of it more as the holiday that starts the season of summer. It is the weekend when pools open, Carowinds expands its hours, schools wrap up their year, and most of us shift into a more casual frame of mind.

With it being Memorial Day, I thought it a good time of year to read a story from the Bible that deals with life and death. And what better story to do that than the story of the death of Lazarus.

Read John 11:1-45

There was a play written several years ago called "Lazarus Laughs." The play begins, or picks up, where the Biblical story leaves off. As the curtain rises, Lazarus is seen stumbling out of the dark, blinking into the sunlight. And after the grave clothes are taken off of him he begins to laugh a gentle, soft laugh; nothing bitter, nothing derisive, an embracing, astonishing, welcoming sound. The very first thing he does is to embrace Jesus with gratitude. Then he begins to embrace his sisters and the other people who were gathered there.

He has a very clear look in his eye, nothing far away. It's as if he's seeing the world about him for the very first time. He reaches over and pats the earth very affectionately. He looks up at the sky, at the trees, at the neighbors as if he had never seen them before, as if he is overwhelmed by the incredible alrightness of the way everything is.

The very first words he utters are the words, "Yes, yes, yes," as if to embrace reality as it is being discovered all over again.

In the play he makes his way back to his house and the whole village of Bethany is awash with wonder. Finally somebody gets the courage to ask what was on everybody's mind. "Lazarus, tell us what it's like to die. What lies on the other side of this boundary that none of us have crossed?"

At that point, Lazarus begins to laugh even more intensely and then he says, "There is no death, really. There is only life. There is only God. There is only incredible joy. There is nothing to fear."

In the play Lazarus goes back to his daily tasks and yet there is something different. He is now a non-anxious person. He is no longer vulnerable to that fear that diminishes the vitality of life. The house where he lives became known as the "House of Laughter," and night after night, you would hear singing and dancing.

And the spirit of this one who had come back with this message that there is nothing to fear began to spread throughout the whole little village. The quality of work began to rise all over Bethany. People began to live more humanely and more generously with each other. There did not seem to be the old occasion for conflicts that there had used to be. In fact, a joy settled over this whole little community because someone had come back saying that there was finally nothing to fear.

However, not everyone in Bethany was pleased with this turn of events. The Roman authorities were quick to sense that this one who had lost his fear of death was, in fact, a threat to the kind of control that they liked to maintain. The way a tyrant holds someone down is by always suggesting that if they don't obey then something terrible, like death, would be used against them.

The Roman authorities move in on Lazarus. They tell him to quit laughing. They tell him his house can no longer be the occasion of parties and all he does is to laugh all the more. "The truth is," he says, "there is nothing you can do to me. There is no death. There is only life."

The Romans become so frustrated that they arrest him. They take him to Caesarea where he appears before a higher official, but he's not able to do anything with Lazarus. And so, in the play, he is taken all the way to Rome.

The play ends as Lazarus stands face to face with the Roman emperor. Here is the man who is allegedly the most powerful of all on earth. He says to Lazarus, "You have a choice. You'll either stop this infernal laughter right this minute or I'm going to have you put to death." And Lazarus continued to laugh.

He says to the emperor, "Go ahead and do what you will. There is no death. There is only life."

There are a couple of ways we can choose to live life. We can live life afraid of our death. If we live life this way we become anxious about everything that happens to us. We surround ourselves with a bunch of material goods to try to protect ourselves. We try to hide behind facades that portray to the world that we are something other than what we really are.

We allow ourselves to become victims to schemes meant to keep our memories short. We fall prey to the powers that be that want us to fear death so that we will trust whatever it is that the powers that be present to us to keep us all safe.

I also hear people tell me that life on earth is simply too difficult to live and they can't wait to leave this earth so that they can be with God where everything will be great. They have the attitude that this life is not really all that important after you accept salvation through Christ.

For those of us who want to escape life on this earth, I share the story of Suzanne Guthrie. Suzanne Guthrie had a near death experience on an operating table. In her words, "I didn't want to come back. My consciousness hovered somewhere above the body lying on the gurney.

It was all over, I thought. The last sensation I remembered had been incomprehensible pain, then a tunnel, and a grinding noise as described in other "near death experiences."

But unlike other people who tell of "NDEs," I saw no lights, no angels, no dead relatives, and no friendly saints; rather, I found myself very much awake in a weightless, imageless, gray hyper reality. I experienced a blessed clarity, freedom and relief, and a stunning sense of the illusory nature of the life I'd left behind.

Then the recovery room nurse enforced an alternative plan for my life. Someone was shaking my body and calling me by name. No! NO! Unprepared and inept, I slipped, as if falling on ice, into that lesser "reality" in a helpless panic of anguish and anger. Suddenly I was back in the confines of that little life of mine.

Now I carried a memory of the futility of this "fake" life. It was as if I hadn't had time to drink the magic "forgetting potion" that makes you immune to truth. I came to consciousness disappointed, frustrated, and unspeakably sad -- and in excruciating pain.

But then, a few hours after the recovery nurse shook me away from gray reality, another nurse put a beautiful but hungry infant boy into my arms. As I held his tightly wrapped body close to mine, my baby suddenly sensed proximity to the solution of his ravenous need. Instinctively, but not less miraculously, he grasped my body and began to nurse."

May we all learn to live life as if death is not to be feared.

May we learn to live life as a gift. AMEN.

-Opening from Zerson, David, Nov. 5, 2006 and found at <http://www.predigten.uni-goettingen.de/archiv-8/061105-7-e.html>.

-Lazarus play from sermon by Claypool, John, March 30, 1997 and found at http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/claypool_4024.htm

-Final story from Guthrie, Suzanne, "Back to Life", Christian Century, March 8, 2005, and found at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3164>

-Text: John 11:1-45

-Given: May 30, 2010 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)