

“Scions of the New Creation”

Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?
(1 Corinthians 15:54-55) ¹

About sixty years ago, when an upholsterer was called to reupholster the chairs in the waiting room of a cardiologist’s office in San Francisco, he noticed something quite unusual about the pattern of wear on the chairs: only the front edges of the seats and the first inch or two of the armrests were worn out. When the upholsterer pointed this out to the physicians, they were curious about what this meant.

As their research continued, Drs. Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman began to put the pieces together. They had already noticed an odd pattern shared by many of their cardiac patients, a pattern that centered on what they called a “chronic sense of time urgency.” Their heart patients showed irritability at being made to wait in line, had difficulty relaxing, and were anxious over delays. Obsessed with not wasting a moment, they spoke quickly, interrupted often, hurried those around them, and were forever rushing around.

This was the reason for the strange wear on the waiting room chairs: the patients sat on the edge of their seats, nervously fidgeting at the arms of the chairs as they watched time tick by. They never relaxed, never even sat back in their chairs. The cardiologists called this new disease “hurry sickness.”

According to Dr. Friedman, hurry sickness “arises from an insatiable desire to accomplish too much or take part in too many events in the amount of time available.” The hurry-sick person is unable to acknowledge that he or she can do only a finite number of things. As a consequence, persons with hurry sickness never cease trying to stuff more and more events into their constantly shrinking reserves of time.”²

Hurry-sickness is but one form of what is technically known as “death anxiety,” a fearsome monster that takes many forms. Last summer *The New York Times* conducted an extensive interview with Larry King, the famous radio and TV personality. Mark Lebovich, the interviewer, concluded that Larry King is “fixated on dying.” Here’s what he wrote about it:

“Shawn King, Larry’s *seventh* wife, told me that he talks so much about his demise that he started to upset their teenage sons, and she had to tell him to knock it off. ‘He kept saying, “Listen, I’m not going to be around much longer, boys,”’ Shawn said. “Whatever you do, don’t let your mother put me in a home.”

King declares himself “emphatically nonreligious,” and he is unable to see how life can end well if it ends up in the ground. So . . . King takes four human growth hormone pills every day, and he claims that he feels great. But just in case he actually *does* die, King has arranged to have his body frozen and then thawed out when researchers discover a cure for whatever killed him—the so-called “cryonics” approach. King told his interviewer that the people behind cryonics are “all nuts,” but at least if he knows he will be frozen he will die with a shred of hope. “Other people have no hope,” King said.³ *Seriously?* Who’s the crazy one here?

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on March 27, 2016, Resurrection Service.

² David W. Henderson, *Tranquility* (Baker), p. 131. See also Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman, *Type A Behavior and Your Heart* (New York: Knopf, 1974).

³ Mark Lebovich, “Larry King is Preparing for the Next Generation,” *The New York Times*, 26 August, 2015.

Actor Johnny Depp, enormously successful from the world's point of view, commented not long ago that "I'm not sure life is supposed to mean anything at all. . . . I think we're here and that's kind of it. Then it's dirt and worms."⁴

And *The Wall Street Journal* noted not long ago that "by all observable metrics, zombies are totally hot right now." Not only do zombies top the best-seller lists and video games, but the undead dominate television, too. "The Walking Dead," a TV show about a world dominated by flesh-eating zombies, nearly outperformed the 2014 Winter Olympics. And *World War Z*, a movie about a zombie apocalypse, was a huge box-office success.

Stephen Marche, a cultural critic for *Esquire*, and an atheist, observed that "After seeing dozens of zombie movies, I'm convinced that the reason zombies are so powerful is that they capture an atheistic fear of the dead. I don't just mean the fear of dead bodies, though that fear is there, too Materialistic atheism . . . does not provide a very comforting way to deal with the dead. Christians and others have prayer and visions of an afterlife. . . . Atheists like myself have rotting corpses and oblivion. And zombie movies."⁵ Feeling better yet?

Death, my friends, haunts us as does nothing else. There are actually no other contenders for first place. Death rumbles continuously under the surface of our lives. It is a dark, unsettling presence always just at the rim of consciousness, whirring away just beneath the membrane of our lives.⁶ And if our faith has nothing to say about death, if our faith offers no victory over death, then "*we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world*" (1 Corinthians 15:19).

Paul wrote that "*if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless. . . and you are still guilty of your sins. . . . If our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world. **But in fact**, Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest who have died. . . . He was seen by Peter and then by the Twelve. After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive. . . . then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles. Last of all . . . **I also saw him***" (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17-20, 5-8).

Many of us here this morning would affirm that, while we may not have physically seen Jesus, we do *know* Him. We talk with Him often . . . and He talks back. **Our purpose this morning is to consider what difference it makes that Jesus is alive and that He has conquered death** (Revelation 20:14, 21:4).

For starters, let's think about it this way. What is your biggest regret in life? Just a few weeks ago, students from Strayer University set up a chalkboard on a sidewalk in New York for a day, with the invitation to "Write Your Biggest Regret."⁷ The chalkboard attracted many people and was soon filled to overflowing with written regrets that were both poignant and thought-provoking.

As the board filled up, the students noticed that almost all of these regrets had one thing in common. Nearly all of them involved the word "not." They were about chances **not** taken. They were about words **not** spoken. They were about dreams **not** pursued

⁴ Brian Hiatt, "An Outlaw looks at 50," *Rolling Stone* (July 2013).

⁵ Daniel W. Drezner, "The Lessons of Zombie Mania," *The Wall Street Journal* (4-5-13); Stephen Marche, "Why Zombies Are Everywhere Now," *Esquire* (6-19-13).

⁶ Irvin D. Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), p. 27.

⁷ <http://www.citylab.com/navigator/2016/02/what-happens-when-new-yorkers-write-their-biggest-regrets-on-a-blackboard/459624/>

- **Not** speaking up
- **Not** being a good husband
- **Not** spending more time with family
- **Not** leaving my comfort zone
- **Not** saying “I love you”
- **Not** applying to med school
- **Not** making the most of every day
- **Not** being a better friend

My friend, what would you give for the chance to have a “do over” for a few things in your life? What would that be worth to you? The Bible tells us that “*the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin*” (1 John 1:7), but anybody could claim to do that.

The point of the Cross of Jesus is our forgiveness; and **the central point of the Empty Tomb is that it proves that Jesus is Who He says He is and that He really does have the power to forgive us.** The message of Resurrection Morning is that **Jesus is the Source of The Great Do-Over.** Jesus is our Door to Beginning Again!

Long ago, some men brought their lame friend to Jesus, and the first thing Jesus did was to tell the lame man, “*Be encouraged, my child! Your sins are forgiven!*” *The religious leaders standing there were scandalized by such a claim, and Jesus knew what they were thinking, so He said to them, “Is it easier to say ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or ‘Stand up and walk’? So I will prove to you that the Son of Man has the authority on earth to forgive sins.” Then Jesus turned to the paralyzed man and said, “Stand up, pick up your mat, and go home!”* (Matthew 9:1-8).

On Resurrection Morning—and on every other morning—we **celebrate Jesus’ power to forgive our Sin. We celebrate His power to save us from our fear of death—and from death itself** (Hebrews 2:14-15, 5:9, 7:25, 27). And once you and I have been set free from our regrets about the past and our fears about the future, then and only then do we become able to live in the present with a **Joy** that has no other Source but Jesus. Let me tell you a couple of stories that show how this works.

Phil Griffin was the pastor of a new church in Texas, and the place where they were meeting had no baptistry. On one particular day they had about thirty people to baptize, and so they got an inflatable swimming pool for that purpose.

As they were getting ready for the service they realized they that they didn’t have a hose with which to fill the pool. They checked around, and nobody seemed to have a hose, so Phil decided to go to the store to get one. As he was leaving, one of their worshipers named John stopped him. Here’s how Phil told the story:

“I’m glad I caught you, pastor,” John said. “I need to talk to you.” I tried to have a conversation with him as I kept aiming for my car, but he said, “No, I need to talk in private.”

So when we got to my office, he said, “I want to know if you’re for real.” I had been talking about how God says to each and every one of us that there is nothing we can do or say to make him not love us. He doesn’t always love our *behavior*, but he loves *us*. So I told John, “Absolutely, it’s for real.”

He said, “Well, I’m struggling with sin in my life. I want to do what God wants me to do—but I’m losing this battle. Several months ago, I tried to go to another church, but when I

came clean with my struggles, they told me never to come back again. So I want to know if you're for real."

We stayed and talked, and before he left my office, he said, "Now I want to tell you one more thing." At this point I'm thinking, *I'm not going to have time to get the hose.*

"When I pulled into the parking lot today, I wasn't aiming my car in this direction. I was going to kill myself." When I asked John if he had a plan for ending his life, he said, "Yes, I did. It was already in motion. I went to the hardware store and bought a garden hose earlier today, and I bought some duct tape. My plan was to drive down this little rural road and tape the hose to my muffler and feed it into my car window." I said, "John, for real, *you bought a hose?*"

"I got a glimpse of redemption that day," Phil wrote. "I saw John cross the line of faith and let Christ put his feet on a different path. And I saw God take something that was intended for death—that hose—and use it to fill up something that means life—the baptismal pool."⁸ And the Good News, my friend, is that **because Jesus is alive, He is able to do that for you, too!**

Keith Mannes' wife's aunt Gladys had always had a small apple orchard in her yard. But last year, when they visited, Keith couldn't help noticing the absolutely huge harvest of apples. All the branches were loaded with apples, and some of the limbs were breaking with the weight. Seldom had anyone seen such a harvest.

When Keith asked Gladys why the harvest was so large, she replied that the previous year had seen a late spring frost that had frozen all the buds. And when that happens, she said, an apple tree does an amazing thing—it stores up all that year's "frozen energy" in thousands of small bumps, or nodules, called "scions." Then, the next year, there is an explosion of buds as the apple tree releases all of this stored-up life.

Reflecting on Gladys' explanation, Keith wrote that "sometimes the harsh frosts of this life—cancer, divorce, bankruptcy, trauma, grief, depression—cause our [lives to feel frozen]. But at the core of the Christian faith we also live with an incredible promise: that in and through Christ, there will eventually be an abundant harvest in our lives.

"God's [resurrection] power is pulsating under the gnarly bark of this world and even in our [own] bodies. In Christ, we are being formed into small nodules of living Hope. During certain seasons of our lives, we feel our hearts waiting, longing, and even aching for those frozen places to burst into life. [And because of Jesus' resurrection, we live in the Hope] that one day all of this stored up glory will be unleashed in a joyful riot of splendor [when He comes to claim His own]."⁹

One more story, and we're done. His mother named him after the gospel writer Mark in the hopes that he, too, would tell the gospel truth. But 13th-Century Europeans found it impossible to believe Mark's claim that, when he was a teenager, he took an epic journey that lasted a quarter of a century, a journey that took him across the steppes of Russia, the rugged mountains of Afghanistan, the wastelands of Persia, and through the Himalayas over the top of the world.

On this fabled journey, Mark saw cities that made European capitals look like roadside villages. He saw palaces that dwarfed the largest castles and cathedrals in Europe. He saw the world's first paper money and marveled at the explosive power of gunpowder.

⁸ Phillip Griffin, "A God Who Redeems," www.preachingtoday.com.

⁹ Keith Mannes, Highland Church, McBain, Michigan; www.preachingtoday.com.

Mark became the first Italian to taste pasta, which was actually invented by the Chinese, and he travelled to places no other European would see for centuries. In fact, it would be 500 years before Europe would manufacture as much steel as China produced in the year 1267.

After serving Kublai Khan for 17 years, Mark began his journey home to Venice, loaded down with gold, silk, and spices; but when he arrived home, people dismissed his stories of a mythical place called China. His priest rebuked him for spinning lies. At his deathbed, his family, friends, and priest begged him to recant his tales of China. But setting his jaw and gasping for breath, Mark spoke his final words, "I have not even told you half of what I saw."

Though 13th-Century Europeans rejected his stories as the tales of a liar or lunatic, history has proven the truthfulness behind the book he wrote about his adventures—*The Travels of Marco Polo*.¹⁰ And here's the bottom line, my friends. Thirteen hundred years before Marco Polo first saw China, the Apostles Paul and John made amazing journeys to Heaven itself.¹¹

As the Venetians of the 13th century dismissed Marco Polo's account, we, too, are tempted to dismiss what Paul and John report to us. Sometimes we jaded postmoderns shake our heads in disbelief at what the Bible tells us about the glory of Heaven. But the biblical writers who describe heaven also declare to us that "**I have not even told you half of what I saw.** Heaven is more joyful, more glorious, and more beautiful than you could ever imagine."¹²

My friends, if we are in Christ, "*we are already God's children, but he has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is*" (1 John 3:2-3).

My friends, the Good News of Jesus' Resurrection is that we no longer have to live with hurry sickness. We don't have to try to figure out ways to beat death. We don't have to seek "comfort" in zombie movies. We don't have to live with a long string of regrets. And we don't have to wonder about the purpose of our lives.

Because Jesus is ALIVE, *you and I are the scions of the New Creation*, with eternal life pulsing and pulsating within us, pushing back the Darkness and transforming the world. **Because Jesus is ALIVE, our lives are worth the living, just because He lives!** Is Jesus at work in your life?

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Travels_of_Marco_Polo

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 12:2-3; Revelation

¹² Dr. Robert Petterson, "All Things New: Our Eternal Home," sermon given at Covenant Presbyterian Church (11-8-09); www.preachingtoday.com; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marco_Polo.