

Sermon: "I Like Walking Through Graveyards"
Scripture: Matthew 28:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
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This may seem strange to you, but I like walking through graveyards. I can't exactly tell you why, but I think it might stem back to the days of my childhood. My dad served a church northwest of Pittsburgh in the dairy farm country of Pennsylvania. This church was called Concord and sat on top of a hill. The house that we lived in was at the bottom of the hill, and the holy ground that was in between was the cemetery. The cemetery was my playground – it was the place where I played army with my brother and hide-and-seek with my friends. It was the place where I would re-enact the stories that I heard from my dad on Sunday mornings. I do not think they appreciated when I called people 'whitewash sepulchers.' When I heard the story about Lazarus being called forth from the grave, I stood at the foot of a grave calling out the name on the tombstone, saying, "Come forth!" as I reenacted that with my friends.

I remember one time when I looked out the window and there were flags all over the cemetery; and I thought they looked awesome and perhaps our house was just undecorated. So I went outside, removed the flags off of the graves and lined the sidewalk and the driveway of our house. I still remember the look on my mom's face and the fact she was out that night putting all of the flags back on the graves – by flashlight – so that when the veterans showed up on Memorial Day everything would be as it was supposed to be. I have since gone back to that church to preach; and I apologized for the flag incident – and many other things.

It was at that same house that I learned the graveyard can also be a very scary place for some people. My bedroom overlooked the cemetery. What was my playground during the day became a very scary place at night. I could have sworn the moon beams that were bouncing off the granite stones and the mist that captured that stuff in the night were the ghosts and goblins that were coming to get me. I was just old enough to have heard some of those stories and watched just enough Chiller Theater to work up a fright in the evenings. I was sure they were coming to get me.

As I have grown up, I am no longer afraid of cemeteries anymore. In fact, I enjoy walking among the stones and reading the epitaphs, wondering about what their lives were like and remembering my own mortality. We are only created to live for a season in this frame; but there is a world to come that we are really created for, and we live today getting ready for that day. I once heard about a tombstone that read, "Here lies an atheist – all dressed up and no place to go." We do not live our lives that way.

In a town where my wife, Beth, and I used to live, there is this incredible cemetery that is a crossroads for anybody that has ever been anything in the Methodist movement. Many of them are buried in that particular cemetery. Every once in a while, when I would need to have a little bit of perspective, I would simply take a walk in the cemetery and read the tombstones as they bear witness to life, faith and character in a world that is to come that is not captured here. I would sometimes wonder what I would want my tombstone to say.

My favorite cemetery is the Arlington National Cemetery just west of downtown Washington, DC. When you drive into Arlington, you will see the U.S. Marine Corps monument; and it does not take long before you find John F. Kennedy's grave. If you

look carefully down the hill – off to the side – you will see his brother Bobby's grave. It is interesting that Bobby is buried in eternity the way he lived his life in reality – always a little lower and off to the side of his brother. There, in that cemetery, you find the Tombs of the Unknowns and can watch the soldiers mark their cadence back and forth. As you are walking around the cemetery, you will hear the tune of taps wafting in the breeze, and a 21-gun salute for another patriot that has been laid into the ground.

My favorite section of Arlington National Cemetery is Section Number 2 where the military chaplains are buried. These are the non-combatants who never bore a weapon. They put their lives on the lines in the midst of horrific circumstances so that they might minister grace in dying moments to those who are fighting so that we might be free. When you walk among these grave stones, you will find incredible affirmations of faith. One stone will read, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." Another will read, "If anyone of us is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old things pass away and behold new things come." Another will read, "Where, oh death, is your victory; where, oh grave, is your sting?" And still another will read, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Is it not interesting that there is good news in a graveyard? After all, we are a people whose whole lives and deaths hinge on the Good News that was first proclaimed in the graveyard. "He is not here for He has risen, just as He said." Jesus is alive, and that changes everything about how we live and how we die.

These days, I sometimes get to work in a graveyard. I see the difference our faith makes in the midst of life and death. You see, a graveyard is still a pretty scary place for some people. I can still remember the first time I had the privilege of proclaiming the Good News in a graveyard for my last grandma (we called her Tiz). She died in 1984 of complications from cancer. She died where she had lived the last 5 years of her life – in my parent's home in her room that was in Erie, Pennsylvania. I was a seminary student in Kentucky and so my parents had called to let me know that she had passed away. We wept that evening; and the next day, we began to pack up and travel to southern West Virginia because my grandmother's heart's desire was to be buried in the coal fields where she had been raised. We took her back to her hometown, and we laid her to rest at the foot of a mountain. My dad and I declared the Good News in a graveyard.

The next morning, Beth and I traveled back to Kentucky – as I had books to read and papers to write. Candidly, it never really hit me that she was gone until one month later. We drove back to Erie for Spring Break, I parked my car into my parent's driveway and I ran into the house halfway up the steps to go see my grandmother; and it hit me – she was not there. I sat down on the steps and started to weep. My mom and dad came to me with tears in their eyes and hugged me while Beth was there comforting me as well. It was at that moment my mom and dad showed me this card. On the front of the card was a beautiful pink rosebud taken through a frosted lens so that you can barely make out the image. On the inside of the card was the verse, "God gave us memories so that we could have roses in December." My mom said, "Jeff, I have some memories of your Grandma Tiz in springtime and summer and you have some memories of her in fall, so why don't we go sit in the dining room and pick some roses together." We sat around that table; and we laughed, and we cried, and we remembered.

It is important for us to remember. Throughout the Scriptures, God reminds people of faith that follow Him that they are always to remember the faithfulness of God, the goodness of God and the promise that God has for us in Jesus Christ – especially

in life's 'Decembers.'

This weekend, Christians are gathering in houses of worship and are remembering those who fought so that we might have a freedom that is never free. They are remembering those who have bled and died so that we might be able to do those things that we can do with all candor today. They are remembering members of the Body of Christ who have entered the church triumphant in the last year. They are remembering God's faithfulness and Jesus' resurrection and the difference that saving faith makes. We remember the lives of those who have walked beside us and led the way for us because they now walk in the fullness of God's presence. We live in hope that their lifetime of memories might help us to live into the same kind of presence.

As I was reading the names of those who died this past year, and as I was inviting people to stand, and as you were listening to the different anthems of the armed forces being sung, I know that in your mind's eye flashes of memory came of the lives that have been lived of those who have gone before us. They flood our minds – memories of springtime, summer and fall as we pick roses in December. They have walked with us through these seasons as they marked the path of faith for us with their steps and they show us the way.

Why is it that we remember the saints who have lived before us? I want to share three reasons we remember the saints today. The first reason is that we remember their footsteps in living life. They lived in response to grace. Their faith in Christ became contagious so that it began to infect and affect every aspect of their lives. We try to emulate their lives because of the example they lived. They lived before us a life that became the Gospel.

Little Danny was saying his prayers one night, sitting on his knees next to his mother. He prayed, "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake..." Then there was a long pause. His mother said, "Go ahead, Danny, and finish the prayer." He said, "Wait a minute." He came up off his knees, and he ran out of the room, went downstairs and a few minutes later he returned and picked up the prayer where he left off. "If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." When he was finished, his mother began to question him as to why he was having difficulty with the prayer. He said, "Mom, I was thinking about what I was praying; but I had to stop and go downstairs and put all of Teddy's toys back where I found them because I messed them up just before I went to bed just to see how mad he would get in the morning." Then he said, "If I should die before I wake, I wouldn't want Teddy to find them like that."

Many things seem fun if you are going to keep on living; but you do not want to keep them like that if you are going to die "before you wake." I wish I always lived in such a way that, if I should die before I wake, nobody would have any regret about the way I left. As we remember those who have gone before us, look at the footprints that they have left in our lives – living as if they would die before they wake – and learn from them.

Why should we remember the saints that have gone before us? The second reason is that we remember their footsteps in the way they approach death. Years ago, while serving another church out of state, I learned an important truth that I have seen lived out over and over again in my life and in my ministry. Those who walk their lives in response to the grace of God tend to die well and most of the time in peace. People have said that the only thing we have in common that we cannot avoid in life is death and taxes. (I will tell you that with a good tax attorney you

might be able to avoid taxes.) But as George Bernard Shaw says, "Death is the most democratic of all experiences. One out of every one people dies." But faith in Christ makes a world of difference.

Elizabeth Elliot, the widow of Jim Elliot – who was one of the missionaries who was killed by the Auca Indians in South America during the fifties – went on to be an incredible person of faith in her life. She tells a story of a young toddler that she was helping who was gravely ill. This young child learned how to recite the 23rd Psalm on her fingers, reciting it phrase by phrase. (Grasping the pinky finger) "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. (Grasping the pinky and ring fingers) He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his namesake. (Grasping the pinky, ring and middle fingers) Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for you are with me. Your rod and your staff they comfort me. (grasping the four fingers) You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup runneth over. (Grasping the thumb) Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

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One morning after a long courageous fight against her disease, the little girl was found dead in her bed – with one hand clutching the thumb of the other. You see, in her dying moments, she knew the Lord was her Shepherd and laid her down in green pastures and led her beside still waters. She knew that the Lord was with her as she walked through the valley of the shadow of death. She knew that He prepared a table before her in the presence of her enemies. She knew that surely goodness and mercy will follow her all of the days of her life because she would dwell in the house of the Lord forever. In the phase of life's final moment, she knew that it was not the end – and she was holding on with the promise of walking through the valley.

As we remember those who have gone before us in Christ, look at the footprints they have left for us in approaching death and learn from them. One of the gifts that Pastor Maxine (Smith-Pierce) has had in the last couple of months is that she has been able to have some conversations with her son, Bill, who knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that when he breathes his last here, he will immediately go into eternity. What great peace that gives to her; but I am here to tell you, that when I was sitting in his room yesterday, what great peace that gives to him. He knows that he will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Why do we remember the saints who have gone before us? The third reason is we remember the footsteps of Jesus who promises eternal life. Jesus was fully human and walked this way, and He lived among us. He taught, He laughed, He cried, He healed, He fed, He forgave, He prayed, He died and He rose so that we might follow in His footsteps and live abundantly – not as people that have no hope who ring their hands, but as people who have great hope and can raise their hands.

Martin Marty tells a story of a Sunday school class with eight precocious third-graders. The teacher had a challenge in teaching these children because one of them, Steven – who the teacher was always watching out for – was a special-needs child. During the weeks proceeding Easter, the teacher gave the children an assignment from one week to the next; and on this particular week, she gave each child a party-hose egg. She asked the children to bring the eggs back to school with something in the egg that reminded them of the new life that comes in spring.

The following day, when the eggs came back to class, they became all mixed up in

the basket; and now the teacher could not tell which one was Stephen's. So she began to open each egg – one at a time. The first egg had a flower in it. The teacher said, "What a wonderful symbol of springtime." The little girl replied, "Yep, that's mine." The next one had a rock in it, and the teacher thought for sure this one was Stephen's. She said, "Well that's special." One child spoke up and said, "That's mine, and it has two meanings – the moss on the rock shows there is life there." Then the little boy added, "Didn't the stone roll away from the tomb?" She opened up a third egg, and a butterfly flew out. This little girl said, "That's mine. I think that is the best one of all." The teacher picked up the fourth egg, and she opened it, and it was empty. She knew it was Steven's. Then Steven said in his halting voice, "Oh teacher, don't forget me. The egg is empty because the tomb was empty. Jesus is not there." Later that summer, Steven took a turn for the worse and he died. His Sunday school class came to the funeral, and each one of them put an egg in the casket – seven eggs – all of them empty.

We stand with two feet firmly planted here; but we look to the world to come. I still enjoy walking through grave yards because the tomb is empty. Jesus is not there, and that changes everything. It changes the way we live, but more importantly it changes the way we die.

