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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

June 30, 2024

Proper 8, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary

[2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27](#)

[Psalm 130](#)

[2 Corinthians 8:7-15](#)

[Mark 5:21-43](#)

“You only are immortal, the creator and maker of humankind; and we are mortal, formed of the earth, and to earth shall we return. For so did you ordain when you created us, saying, ‘You are dust, and to dust you shall return.’ All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.”

(BCP p. 499)

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We hear those words at funerals, during the commendation of the departed person’s body toward the end of the service. They were heard in this space yesterday at the funeral of Daniel Markwyn, and two weeks ago at Brookdale care facility at the funeral of Howard Callahan, and a month ago here for the funeral of Betty Byrnes, and before that in early May for the funeral of Joe Michalek. We say them when a person has died after a long and rich life, and when a person dies tragically and unexpectedly and too young. “All of us go down to the dust.”

It's one of the most universal facts of being a human being, isn't it? We are mortal; we go down to the dust. The very word *human* comes from the same root in Latin as the word *humus*. We are soil people. Whether we live long and satisfying lives brought to a wistful but fitting close, or whether we fall prey to sudden illness or tragic accident or warfare or famine, each of us will some day embark on the same mysterious journey into something completely unknown that has happened to every human being since the dawn of time. And in the face of that reality, the most deeply human thing to do is lament.

That's what David does on learning of the death of his best friend Jonathan, and Jonathan's father King Saul. In the Old Testament David is portrayed as a poet and musician; traditionally he was thought to be the composer of the biblical book of Psalms. Here he spontaneously uses his expressive gifts to mourn for the king and his heir: Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen! O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you with crimson, in luxury. Jonathan lies slain upon your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me.

I wonder in our contemporary society whether we've lost some of the habit of mourning well. If a visitor from Biblical times came to visit us they might be surprised that we don't clean and prepare our loved ones' bodies ourselves; surprised that our funeral services feature so little wailing; surprised at the way we behave awkwardly with people in grief, sometimes so afraid of saying the wrong thing that we might say nothing at all. Now there are some wrong things to say in grief, things that tend to deny the loved one's right to feel pain at all—things like “Don't worry, it was God's will.” And I don't think we should go back to the customs of Victorian England with black lace and enforced solitude.

But I do wonder if we might do well to recover some of David's ability to sing and wail and show his grief in public—to name death as the reality and the travesty it is.

People certainly knew how to do that in Jesus's time. As he arrives at the synagogue leader's house he meets mourners weeping and wailing. And Jesus then definitely says the wrong thing. He makes the seemingly awkward, offensive statement that the girl isn't dead but sleeping. It says they laughed at him—was it because they were mocking him, or because they were trying to cover over the huge social discomfort of what he had just said? What the people don't know is that they are in the presence of the one for whom death has no power.

And so he raises her up. And what he is doing is a kind of prophetic sign, a kind of worked demonstration of what is true in a bigger sense. Jesus is acting out in one specific deed here what is always the case in God's kingdom: that death, for God, has no more power than sleep. Think about this for a moment. What would your life look like if you weren't afraid of death? What boldness would it give you? What freedom? What would you be able to let go of? What would you begin to do?

Death has no power over Jesus. And so he lives his life free of the self-protective, self-justifying mechanisms that dominate us so thoroughly. He acts with total freedom and integrity, even when it becomes clear that doing so will lead him to a death that is both painful and shameful. And when three days later God does to Jesus what Jesus did to the girl—takes him up and raises him to new life—the truth of how Jesus lived becomes revealed for all.

The theologian James Alison once wrote, “None of us has any reason to fear being dead, something which will unquestionably happen to all of us, since that state cannot separate us effectively from the real source of life. Death is an empty shell for God, a bark without a bite.”<sup>1</sup> St. Paul put it similarly: “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor things present, nor things to come, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.”

And so the early church referred to the sisters and brothers who had died as having “fallen asleep”—not as a pleasant euphemism, the way we say someone has passed on, but as an expression of confident faith that just like the young girl, those who die in God’s love are “not dead but sleeping”—and that the one who gives us our first life by bringing us into the human race is able to give us a resurrected life in the family of Jesus.

So whatever your life would look like if death had no power over you—your life can look like that. Because thanks be to God, death has no power over you or me or any of God’s beloved children. Thanks to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we can grieve fully, like David—but we can also say: Even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.

#### Announcements

- General Convention concluded; Amy Nykamp and Miriam Casey; PB-elect Sean Rowe; writeup next week
- Generational Plan adopted and will be available soon; need photo after service for front cover
- Office closed for Independence Day 7/4
- Summer Incarnation Choir, all welcome, rehearsals weekly 9am

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<sup>1</sup> *Raising Abel* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 29.