

Bury the Graveyard

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"Tell yourself something you have no faith in has already begun to occur."

Kathleen Graber

After Covid's death threat forced every broadcast-resistant congregation in America to become a cut-rate Crystal Cathedral; after an ICU visit to a dead 28 year old on a respirator; after repeatedly delivering the indignity of live-streamed funerals; after teenaged screen-school and its attendant suffering; after suffering the virus and its idiot politics; after feeling the specter of death take shape and intensify so acutely it seemed death had become a living, breathing beast; after humming hymns because death would not let us sing; after singing hymns through a spit-wet mask.... I cannot tolerate the euphemism "passed."

This essay will not be about euphemisms for death. I'm prevaricating because what I need to say is alarming, and I want you to keep reading. Trigger warning: rationalist mainline clergy, I am going to suggest that on your annual chance to preach to a relative crowd, you proclaim a truth offensive to anyone who ever took a middle school science class. This essay will ask you to preach about the general resurrection on Easter Sunday.

Back to euphemisms, *breathed his last, met her maker, gave up the ghost*, each of these would allow us to avoid "death" with a measure of elegance. We chose the flattest option — *passed*. I suspect this is because we see death as the opposite of success. Death is failure. Karl Barth wrote that our mortality "means a great 'No' has been pronounced over us." We protest with a thin, shrill yes. "She didn't fail! She didn't die! She *passed*."

Death denial is hard to set down because we are constantly picking it back up. Phone screens beam vitality at us. When the quarterback slips, the spotlight shifts. Looking away doesn't solve the problem. The elderly live in cordoned off "communities." Even the most elegant nursing home resembles a leper colony. Treating age as a contagion lets us regard death as a rumor. You can silence it by spending well: concierge physicians, personal trainers, organic greens. None of this comes cheap. Consumerism requires sacrifice. But, those who believe get to live forever. Until they don't.

When death hits a fit person, it's not the loss that hurts us most, but the fact that our secular faith betrayed us. "How could this have happened? *She took care of herself.*" Nobody said "*But he took care of himself*" when people with comorbidities began to fill the ICU. Novelist and art critic John Denger blames the belief that everything is for sale. "Consumerist ideology, which has become the most powerful and invasive on the planet, sets out to persuade us that pain is an accident, something that we can insure against. This is the logical basis for the ideology's pitilessness." The

Covid dead made the wrong choices, ate the wrong food, bought the wrong meals. *"They didn't take care of themselves."* But the deaths kept coming. Schools closed. The deaths kept coming. Church stopped. The deaths kept coming. Covid blew through consumerist theodicy, wrecking our ability to explain the grave away. At the height of the pandemic, people *passed* faster and faster, even as the word itself began to fail. If this is true, it is subconscious. On the surface we mean "passed" as in "transition." Death precedes heaven like winter precedes spring. The soul sheds its dead carcass and passes to heaven the moment a person dies. Like a snake.

Paul doesn't like it. In the Message translation of 1 Corinthians 15:50: "Our natural, earthly lives don't lead us by their very nature into the kingdom of God. Their 'nature' is to die, so how could they naturally wind up in the kingdom?" If death is a transition, it moves us from life into the ground. If we need one, *die! nap* is a theologically apt circumlocution. Barth again, "Death is the end of all human and creaturely life and creativity and work. . . ; it is not a new human height, but the abasement of everything that precedes."⁶

Why can't we say *Hazel died*? When we respect the enemy, our victory over the grave retains its frightening glory. Hazel is the last person I buried. She died after spending nearly two years in and out of hospice care. Her friend Carole helped Hazel bear her death but couldn't bring herself to say the word. She wrote me a note that said "Thank you for your help during *the inevitable process*."

The truth has been revealed: death is inevitable. Covid snacked our practiced denial with the force of a two-by-four to the temple. Six months after we resumed in-person worship, I told the members of my church council, "It feels like Saint Paul's suffered a concussion." They replied, "It's not just church. It's everywhere." This general wooziness puts the preacher at a weird advantage. In years when I am obligated to proclaim resurrection to worshipers who willfully ignore death, the lack of correlation makes Christ's victory nonsensical. I know this because I have been offended by the absurdity of my own Easter preaching. Remote in one hand, phone in the other, we spread ourselves across life's surface, distracted from everything but our own irritation. Martin Heidegger famously called it "forgetfulness of being."⁷ It is the state many of us live in much of the time. We drift and we float. Or we did. Thanks to the pandemic, we now feel the existential undertow.

Years ago I planned a funeral for a 103-year-old woman. I did the preparation with her grandson, a fit, vibrant man in his early 50's. As we walked through the sanctuary on our way to my office, he told me he had not been in the church since his confirmation. Then he broke down. He wailed. He howled. "I can't believe she's gone. It is so unfair. How could she be dead?" The poor man had to deal with the loss of his grandmother and the blunt fact of mortality. When death struck, it left him alone with both, and he could not stand it. In a startlingly innovative new book titled *Grief is not Sacred*, psychotherapist John Connelly writes, "Emotional turmoil thrives in isolation, alienation, and loneliness."⁸ Connelly believes that much of what we interpret as the pain of grief is actually the pain of isolation.

The more isolated a person is, the less adept they are at navigating social currents. Interactions become awkward, and awkward interactions drive a person into deeper loneliness. How do you talk to a stranger when you haven't had a conversation in weeks? How do you talk to an angel when you haven't spoken to your best friend in days? One option the lectionary offers preachers this year is the Easter story from John's Gospel.

Standing at the mouth of Jesus' grave, Mary Magdalene stammers and fumbles.

Mary weeps. The gardener speaks: "Why are you weeping?" All she wants is his dead body. Is that too much? She tries to let her anger overwhelm her pain, but the gardener interrupts: "Mary." She knows the voice. "Teacher!" Her pain was a sun-bright beacon, her isolation a prayer of invocation: Come Lord Jesus! When we cry out, He acts. He is prone to arrive when we're in tears. Tears might be the best lens to view him through. For this reason, you should spend time at the mouth of the tomb this Easter. But not too much time.

Right before the first Easter after 9/11, the church I served printed 2,500 post-cards, inviting the entire neighborhood to worship. I wrote the copy: "The ancient truth in a progressive church. Beautiful music and a short, joyful sermon." When I sat down to compose my message, I could not stop thinking about bodies falling and bombs dropping, the dead in New York and the dead in Afghanistan. I knew Christ's resurrection could upend their graves, but I spent more than half of that sermon contemplating death. Afterward in the handshake line, an elderly man I'd never seen sighed, "Young man, that was not joyful." Then he looked me in the eyes saying "and I don't think it was short either."

This Easter, we need to face the pandemic without being subsumed by it. Every single person who donned a mask in 2019 felt death breathe down their neck. Preachers don't need to belabor death. At the same time, our collective awareness of the grave could strike isolation with a killing blow. None of us are alone. We are all grieving.

Meanwhile, there is a larger death stalking all of existence. The polar ice caps are melting faster than the minutes of our lives. So we kill lions to clear forests to grow palm oil to replace fossil fuels. 90% of the world's lion population has expired since 1993. No wonder we are grieving. Or maybe I've got the facts wrong. Maybe I don't know a thing about lions. That's entirely possible. It isn't just our planet. Truth itself might be dying.

Our task on Easter is to name a truth greater than the death of lions, earth, and honesty. Our task this Easter is to address the badgering suspicion that *everything is ending*. Our task this Easter is to craft sermons that kill the disorienting pain of pandemic grief as effectively as a dentist kills a toothache.

To borrow a phrase, we believe grief follows loss like thunder follows lightning, if thunderclaps rolled for years. Grief is a drawn out experience of longing. Grief is the price you pay for love. I've said that at many funerals. The implication is that the more you love, the more harrowing your pain. We accept this because such pain

may be our only enduring connection to the dead. There is a temptation to cherish it. Everyone knows you must express it. If you repress it, it will fester and double, then club you. This means a grieving nation, a grieving world, must bewail itself back to health. Here is how Jon Connelly describes the conventional wisdom: "Painful emotions need to be expressed in order to be eliminated. Such emotions need to be felt in order to be expressed. So, people are encouraged to feel bad in order to eventually feel somewhat better."⁷

He then asks a surprisingly rude question: What if that is wrong? Connelly believes our reverence for grief inflicts injuries on the bereaved. "Anything that causes a loving couple whose child has died to go through a divorce cannot be sacred."⁸ Connelly makes a distinction between the conscious mind and the deeper primitive mind by highlighting the difference between "I" and "self": "*I am not always in control of my self.*" In that sentence, the *I* is the alert, knowing mind. The "self" is the unconscious that keeps my blood pumping and my lungs breathing and my basic drives fired. In grief, the two suffer a disconnect. The result is the emotional equivalent of an avocado pit in the garbage disposal. "The primitive mind responds to the conscious mind's desire to be with the deceased loved one by reminding you of the need to connect."⁹ I miss my dead father. My self says "connect." It doesn't know he's dead. It just says "connect, connect, connect." I am not in control of myself, so I cry, cry, cry.

The primitive minds in the members of our Covid-stunned, climate-anxious congregations don't know our death denial was upended by the pandemic and don't know we have guaranteed ourselves a grim environmental future. Those minds just say "Return to blissful ignorance. Return, return, return." We are not in control of ourselves, so we cry, cry, cry.

Connelly believes "grief happens because the mind persists in its attempt to cause the grieving individual to connect to the loved person in a way that does not and will not work."¹⁰ After diagnosing the problem, Connelly spends the majority of his book teaching a therapeutic method that aims to sustain a sense of connection between the living and the dead. I hope this portion of his book ignites a sea change in the therapeutic world. But as a preacher, it is Connelly's nearly joyful attack on grief that excites me, which is to say that as preachers we are called to name what will connect the living and the dead the day this world ends.

The gospels do not know grief as we understand it. They know shock in the face of death. Jesus wept over Lazarus, Mary wept over Jesus, and Peter ran in circles, telling lies. Loss is real and can drop us to our knees. But none of the disciples waited an entire year after Jesus died to make a major life decision. No one told Mary the only way to heal was to keep weeping. Reading Connelly helped me realize Jesus did not want his mother to ache and reel every time she thought of him. ¹¹ Instead of grieving, the New Testament wants us to rejoice at death's defeat. Christ's survivors face the grave with triumphant glee. "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

There are few chapters of scripture more luminously strange than the Gospels' resurrection accounts. This year, the lectionary gives us one of them. What Paul says about death in 1 Corinthians 15 is too much...and not enough. The light of its strange glory is almost blinding. The passage has a giddy, lunatic quality: "The trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised beyond the reach of death, never to die again."

The last time I preached on the general resurrection, a trustworthy member of my church told me he found the sermon "intellectually insulting." I understand his resistance. The resurrection of Jesus is nearly impossible to believe. The resurrection of *everyone* is several steps beyond that. But, without the promise of its universal conclusion, Easter is reduced to a one-off miracle in which Jesus defeats his own death, amen. If resurrection took place for Jesus alone, it would be the only New Testament miracle rooted in His self-interest. This seems profoundly *off* and is a poor basis for our religion. No one celebrates the anniversary of Houdini's greatest escape.

The incarnation and the scars Jesus carried after Easter are hard to reconcile with the popular notion that *you* can go to heaven while your body stays behind. Soul and body comprise the self. Without both, you are not going anywhere, because without both you don't exist. If we turn down the popular theology of an eternal soul/body dualism and listen to scripture, we find that we will not pass away before going up to heaven. We will die. After dying, we will wait. Then at the promised end, heaven will come down to us, this ravaged earth will be made new, and we will rise to live again. The challenge is not to make sense of Biblical logic. The challenge is to believe it. The challenge is finding a way to trust that we will be knit back together, God's hands on the knitting needles, all of our once-dead molecules reassembled.

Months before Easter, Jesus told his followers he would be resurrected. They were walking down a dusty road. I imagine that Mary Magdalene, Joanna, the other Mary, and their unnamed friend heard him say it. He would suffer, be rejected, killed, and on the third day he'd rise again. They believed half the story. He would die. Who doesn't? They felt the threat of the forces allied against him. "I'll suffer." Sad but entirely probable. "And on the third day, I'll rise again." *That* sentence hung in the air. It cracked something open between the hard facts all around them and the dread inside their hearts, both of which suggested that sentence was nonsense. The women kept on walking.

The lectionary also gives us the choice to use Luke this Easter. I imagine that in this version of the story, the women woke up on Easter morning having given up two days before. Jesus is dead. Death wins. This means that mortality is the most powerful, irrefutable, unavoidable, far-reaching, all-determining thing in existence. Which makes it God. Which means that God is negation, punishment, cessation, nothingness. Which is to say that if death wins, God does not exist. If you have not considered that possibility, you have let piety silence honesty. The women who made their way to Jesus' grave must have wrestled with these questions. On that first Easter morning, Christ's death and their own pain came barreling toward them. So they trudged to the graveyard. The pain inside them syncopeated to the brutality around them. Death wins.

They walk straight into the tomb. Two men in dazzling clothes emerge. The women are terrified. The angels say, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen." The women look at each other. The space Jesus' words once cracked open is no more than a sliver between the fact of his death and the pain of their loss. But they remember it. He said it would happen. He said that he would rise again. Death has been defeated. Christ is risen. God is alive! The angels have proclaimed it. The sliver grows into a meadow, a prairie, a landscape broad and beautiful. The women leap into this new reality Easter has just broken open.

And then they run. They cannot wait to tell the others. Our faith's first four preachers go running with their proclamation: Christ is risen! Death may have a claim on you, but its grasp is weak. When it comes, the "no" of your mortality will be overwhelmed by Christ's day-break brilliant Easter morning "YES." They mean it. They feel it. Their words are met with disbelief. The apostles hear the women's sermon and write it off as nonsense. These men are suffering. Jesus is dead. A sermon in the face of that fact and their own feelings? It means nothing. The women won't be quiet: "Christ is risen. Christ is risen."

Insistent proclamation can make you doubt the strength of reason. It can push you past the limits of our logic. A sermon can gesture toward something else. It can name a third space between what pediatric psychiatrist Donald Winnicott called our "inner experience and our outer reality."² What if there is something else? Another kind of knowing, another kind of truth, a way of living that doesn't automatically assume the truth is limited to facts and feelings?

A good Easter sermon can crack our sense of possibility wide open by naming an approach to life that isn't determined by the unstable turns of our own moods or the cold reality all around us. This Easter after Covid grimly marched so many to the grave, we can proclaim that Christ is risen, not as an isolated miracle, but as our jubilant grand marshal, the first person in an endless parade of resurrection. You can call yourself a Christian and never come to church. You can celebrate Easter by going straight to brunch. This Easter, our worshipers will come to church because they are hurting and their hurt has slipped to wonder. Are the old rumors true? They will come longing to be told that death has been defeated.

We have been taught to live as if the whole of reality were confined to what we can see and to how we feel, to what our limited, blinkered science can report, and to what we might make of it. But in the realm of the really real, "the facts" can only see what we have told them to look for.

What if there's more? As the women's proclamation echoed, Peter began to wonder. Even in his pain he wonders. Then he sprints to the tomb. Who runs to the graveyard? Before he gets there, Peter has already entered a different realm. He steps cautiously into the tomb. He sees that Christ is gone. There are no angels either. All he has is the story the women told and on the ground, Christ's empty burial cloth. Peter picks it up, holds it, this thin thin fabric, in his hands but barely there. Sunlight

through the tomb's door shines in the cloth's gossamer weave. Peter feels its warmth on his face. With nothing but fine lightness in his hands, it hits him. Christ is risen. Now the ears of his ears awake. Now the eyes of his eyes are opened. Christ is risen indeed, risen, as the first fruits of resurrection.

I have a childhood friend who grew up on a cherry farm. I know his orchards well, but my knowledge is limited to the super abundance just before the harvest, when the boughs are heavy with the weight of sweetness and fruit nearly sweeps the ground. I asked my friend about finding the first fruit. He said that the first fruit meant excitement and a promise of abundance in the future. He said the first fruit always looked ideal. Then he said the last fruit brought relief. The first fruit defeats death. The last fruit will close the graveyard's gates forever.

My predecessor served Saint Paul's for more than thirty years and then retired into our congregation. He was an exceedingly humble, often hilarious man. His name was Tom. He died recently after Covid and long Covid and cancer and pneumonia. We buried his ashes in the church's memorial garden. The funeral was gigantic. The interment of his ashes was small: his two adult children, a granddaughter, me, and a church custodian who loved him dearly and dug the hole. Tom had selected a very elegant biodegradable urn. He was a sharp dresser and a thoughtful man. He knew that the statute granting Saint Paul's permission to bury ashes requires us to use an environmentally safe urn. If the urn was not biodegradable, I would have to transfer his ashes to one that was.

What he couldn't know is that when we received his ashes from the crematorium, they were in his urn, but sealed in a thick plastic bag. So I had to cut the bag open and carefully transfer Tom's ashes back into his urn. I did this in the church kitchen.

I mustered up somber feelings appropriate to the occasion. I felt sad because I was supposed to feel sad. This was a grievous task. When I cut the bag open, a small puff of ash hit the air and settled on the kitchen floor. It could have been a sigh. Knowing Tom, it could have been a laugh. Either way, a breath of ashes.

As these ashes settled on the kitchen floor, I began to think about the countless little chores Tom performed in the church building over his long tenure. I know these chores because I inherited them: the things that slip between the cracks, picking up stray candy wrappers, washing random dishes, folding tables, watering neglected flowers. I bent down to sweep the ashes up, then stopped myself. It seemed appropriate for part of him to stay right at the heart of our church building. Not in the pulpit, but in the heart of the building.

I laughed out loud, then immediately censored myself. "Oh no! Inappropriate! You're supposed to be grieving." At this moment, something shifted. I felt deep assurance. Tom wouldn't want me to stand in the church kitchen and feel bad on his account. He would want me to laugh at the absurd poetry of some essential part of him rising up from the church kitchen to join the rest of him, knit back together, restored and made whole before walking out of the graveyard with everyone he had ever grieved.

The promise of bodily resurrection raises questions before it has the chance to raise the dead. Standing with Tom's children as we buried his dust down in the earth, I thought of my own father's grave, and then I thought of his body: his citrus scent and the sound of his laughter, his bald head and strong hands. The molecules that made him *him* are going to be knit together again? And he is waiting for that moment, just as I am? We share this intimate connection, and we share it with everyone who ever lived? It seems impossible. But so does the distance of the stars or blankets of snow. So does the taste of salt and the taste of sweet. The sound of a trumpet is unlikely and so is almost every voice that ever said "I forgive you." It is not my job to place a limit on possibility. My father died, I will die. We will be raised again. We share that connection with every one of the covid dead who died like Jesus, on ICU's between two strangers, alone and isolated. Christ is risen. We will rise. We are all connected in that promise. It makes me feel giddy.

Another question: What happens to our physical disfigurement? In the resurrection will I limp because I did not complete all of the prescribed physical therapy after tearing my Achilles tendon? I am no martyr, but I find this answer from Caroline Walker Bynum satisfying: "Medieval theologians believed that the scars of the martyrs would survive in resurrection, but healed into rose petals."¹² You don't have to understand that claim. Your congregation does not have to talk about the universal resurrection. Aviva Zornberg says, "Easy utterance travesties God's revelation."¹³ John Berryman chimes in: "I do not understand, but I believe / Jonquils respond with wit to the teasing breeze."¹⁴ We do not even have to "believe" in resurrection, if we can only believe within the limits of AP Chemistry. All we need to do is grab hold of the risen Christ. Let God lift you with him. Tell your people this: He will move you as the wind moves a field of flowers, and you will rise up gleeful, grief gone forever.

Notes

1. Kathleen Gruber, "The Synthetic A Priori," *The Eternal City* (Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 25.

2. Karl Barth, *Deliverance to the Captives*, (Harper, 1961) p. 147.

3. John Berger, *Hold Everything Dear: Dispatches on Survival and Resistance* (Knopf/Doubleday, 2008), p. 45.

4. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Volume IV: The Doctrine of Reconciliation, Part 2* (T & T Clark, 1958), p. 295.

5. Martin Heidegger, *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon*, edited by Mark W. Wainwright (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 88.

6. John Connolly, *Grief is Not Soared* (The Institute for Rapid Resolution Therapy, 2022), p. 17.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

8. Connolly makes this point early and often in his book, for instance on the very first page: "The person you love does not want you to suffer. Being out of pain is best for you and the whole world. You do not have to go through grief. I can just dissolve."

9. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

12. Aileen Phyllips, *Whitcomb* (Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 116.

¹³ Caroline Bruenn, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1236* (Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 345, footnote 81.

¹⁴ Ariyah Zornberg, *Moses: A Human Life* (Yale University Press, 2022), p. 24.

¹⁵ Jean Berryman, "Eleven Addresses to the Lord," *Love and Fame* (Harrat, Strauss and Giroux, 1973), p. 92.