

“A good funeral”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
April 2, 2017

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In 1983, the son of famed pastor William Sloane Coffin died in a car accident. He was just 24 years old. His name was Alexander. He was a student at Boston University and was returning with a friend from a tennis game when their car missed a turn in the dark rain and plunged into the South Boston channel.

Ten days later, Rev. Coffin climbed into the pulpit of Riverside Church in New York City and delivered his first sermon since his son’s death.

He told his congregation how he had received a flood of letters. Some had brought him considerable comfort, but many had left him feeling even more alone. They quoted the Bible, offered advice and consolation, and pontificated on God’s grand plan. And the more they preached, the angrier Rev. Coffin grew.

These good Christians wanted to fix him, to tie up his grief in a neat, little bow. “They were using,” he writes, “comforting words of Scripture for self-protection, to pretty up a situation whose bleakness they simply couldn’t face.”

Bleak like a father outliving his son.

Bleak like Ezekiel standing in that desert valley, full of sand and wind and the bleached bones of the people who had died years ago when the Babylonian army had rolled into Israel brandishing sword and fire. Bleak like the grief of survivors who mourn the dead they cannot bury, who feel God and hope are lost. Bleak like God asking Ezekiel if these bones can live, and Ezekiel shrugging his shoulders and saying, “I have no idea.”

Bleak like Mary kneeling at Jesus’ feet and washing them with her tears, saying, “Lord, if you had only been here... if you had only done something... my brother would not have died.”

We have invented all kinds of ways to hide from the bleak reality of death and grief. We won’t even speak its name. We say, “We’re so sorry for your *loss*,” as if your loved one were simply misplaced. We write letters, like the ones received by Rev. Coffin, and try to help people see the bright side. Your heart rips and spills out, and the best we offer is a mop.

Today, it is common practice not even to invite the dead to their own funeral; we have upbeat memorial services instead of funerals, where the dead—either in a casket or an urn—are conspicuously absent. Many others choose not to have a service at all.

Truth is we just don’t know what to do with the dead... or with the grief left behind.

And that, my friends, leads to the miracle in the two stories you have heard this morning. It is the miracle of a *good* funeral. We don't have to know what to do. We don't have to know whether these bones can live. We don't have to have the right spiritual words. We don't have to be certain that the power of life can overcome the reality of death. We just have to come and see.

“Come and see”—two of the most powerful words in all of Scripture, powerful enough to make a disciple out of Andrew and to bring Jesus to the tomb of his friend Lazarus.

These two words invite you to come as you are.

Brokenhearted. Lost. Doubting... Come and see.

It is, admittedly, not an easy invitation. When Jesus instructs the people to roll away the stone that bars the way to Lazarus's body, Martha objects. The bleak stench of death, she says, will be too overwhelming. Better to leave it alone. But Jesus insists that they look.

He doesn't deny Martha her tears. In fact, he cries too. He just asks her to come and see. Come and see, he says, “the glory of God.” Jesus cries, “Lazarus, come out!” And suddenly, the dead man stands before his loved ones as he truly was, is, and will be.

In the same way, God takes Ezekiel by the hand and brings him among the dead. God asks the question upon which every funeral pivots: “Can these bones live?” Ezekiel says, “Oh Lord, you alone know.” This ambiguous response might seem like a cheat. But for God, it is the right answer. It is an honest facing of the mystery and reality of death.

Suddenly, Ezekiel sees the bones take on flesh; they grow sinews and skin. They breathe. They live. Not only the dead, but also the survivors, the exiles, the ones whose grief had become a living death and who believed this bleak reality proof of God's absence. For them, God is suddenly as present as the breath that fills their lungs. “In just fourteen verses, the word *ruach* occurs nine times, and while it is variously translated as “breath”, “wind”, and God's own spirit... it is all the same life giving force. And it is all from God” (Margaret Odell).

God says, “I will open your graves... I will raise you... I will bring you home... I will put my spirit within you... I will place you on your own land.”

Now, *that* is a good funeral.

A good funeral draws a community together, faces the reality of death, invites lament and questioning, and creates space for God to answer. A good funeral speaks prophetic words that take dry bones and enliven them in our memory and resurrect them in the kingdom. A good funeral empowers us to “come and see” the dead faithfully and to bring the dead face to face with God.

A good funeral is, in the words of Thomas Long, “the grand cosmic drama of the church marching to the edge of eternity with a fellow saint, singing songs of resurrection victory and sneering in the face of the final enemy.”

When his son died, Rev. Coffin didn't want eloquent words, or explanations, or cheap optimism. He wanted his son. He wanted to be able to see him again. The boy who'd light up a room. The boy who was studying sociology. The boy he had held as a baby, spitting up and dirtying diapers. The boy he had watched learn how to ride a bike and go on his first date. He wanted the good and the bad. He wanted it all. He wanted Alexander.

And a good funeral would give him Alexander, just as it gave Mary and Martha Lazarus. A good funeral would tell a story of Alexander's life, not just a "vague" and "sanitized" facsimile, but who he really was, and is. And it would tell another story. The story of how God once walked this earth and how death came to think it had beaten God, had crucified and buried our own Lord Jesus Christ. It's a story of how Jesus then marched into the pit of hell and carried us out on his back, how God that Easter day broke the cross, promised resurrection, and said that nothing, not even death itself, will separate us from God or each other.

In telling these two stories, in calling out the dead and giving them flesh—both in memory and in eternal life—we who grieve their passing are enfolded also. We are empowered to go on living, to take another step, eat another bite, laugh another laugh, cry another tear, and yes, breathe. In a good funeral, God gives us breath.

So come, and see the glory of God. See the dead rise to life. If we come to a funeral, not with our own answers, our own strategies back to life, but with open arms, breaking hearts, and listening ears, God will speak a word, and that word will be life.

**Amen.**