

Preaching in the valley of actual death

My task at funerals is to share the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

by [Thomas R. Steagald](#) in the [July 13, 2022](#) issue



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John Wesley had a portable pulpit. The immediate need was practical: he was short, and his pulpit elevated him so that he could be seen and heard. Perhaps more importantly, the portable pulpit turned every open field into a preacher's corner. Wesley, who considered the world his parish, preached anywhere he could. On one occasion, he was forbidden to preach in his father's old church in Epworth, England, so he preached just outside instead—while standing on his father's tombstone.

I have recently been thinking about cemeteries as venues for our own field preaching and funerals as metaphorical platforms for authentic evangelism. I believe that gospel proclamation is a form of prophetic pastoral care for those who may be grieving. Where better than a funeral to announce the Good News that God has acted in Jesus? That Jesus has embraced our suffering as his? That by faith we may lay hold of his resurrected life as ours? That despite appearances, divine love has

not and will not let us go? Yet it is often quite hard—harder than we may imagine it should be—to say such things at a funeral, especially when the funeral is a difficult one.

Years ago, my bishop gave me emergency pastoral responsibility for a nearby congregation whose pastor had been suspended. The day after the pastor left, and unrelatedly, Eve, the twentysomething daughter of a couple in that church, died by suicide. I pleaded with the bishop to reinstate the pastor, at least for the funeral duties that I felt inadequate to perform. She refused.

When I went to meet the distraught parents, they asked me if I would be willing to invite the Lutheran pastor who had baptized the young woman as an infant to do the service. None of them had seen each other in the decades since the family had moved, but that sacramental connection was important to the moment and stronger than any association I had with them.

The small rural church was packed to overflowing. At least half the attendees were Eve's friends, all of them dressed in black, each with the grim expression that said, "In the midst of life we are in death." I wondered whether any of them grew up in the church or retained any vestige of childhood faith. Eve's parents had told me that their daughter had rejected the church and its witness in no uncertain terms. I prayed that some of her friends retained a husk, a remnant, vocabulary enough to hear from whom our help comes and perhaps even believe it. I prayed that for the rest of us, too.

The Lutheran pastor acknowledged in his sermon that Eve was troubled, possessed of a restless, contrarian soul. He talked about her tattoos, which he interpreted as a challenge to the world's hypocrisies and idolatries.

"But long before she marked herself," he went on, raising his right hand and—to the mouth-gaping shock of the assembled—making a large sign of the cross, "Jesus had already marked her with the sign of his own love and claiming. Her baptism: a watermark, before and below any other marking she or the world could affix." Jesus loved Eve, he said, and loves her still. "Such is the Good News of the gospel, for her and for all of us."

If I had not already been a Christian, I would have sworn holy faith on the spot.

What has happened to the powerful funeral sermon?

Grieving people need to hear the very things that clergy easily lose the nerve to say.

The age of denominational association, in which groups of people shared a common vocabulary about death and dying, is largely dead. Among those who do maintain some Christian association, ever smaller numbers regularly attend worship. Fewer still participate in any kind of Bible study. All of this has radically reduced opportunities to share the metaphors of Christian hope. As we are less and less conversant in the stories of our constitutive doctrines and increasingly ignorant of the sources of our peculiar hopes, our ancestral wells have been filled in.

This situation presents a profound challenge to the work of preaching at a funeral. In this environment, our resurrection faith and verdant proclamation might appear mummified and dry.

Unlike Wesley at Epworth, we have not been prevented from preaching in the church. It's just that people rarely come inside to hear. But if faith comes through hearing and hearing from the preaching of Christ, how shall they hear? *Where* shall they hear?

It seems audacious to proclaim that they could hear it at funerals. But crowds still gather in cemeteries and funeral home chapels, just as a crowd gathered to hear Wesley that afternoon in the Epworth churchyard. The problem is that, absent the peculiar Christian hope that, as Tom Long says, can "shake a fist in the face of Death," the church has had nothing life-giving to say into the darkness of loss and grief. We still need what C. H. Dodd called "apostolic preaching": a particular and distinctive word of life, rooted in the life story of Jesus and his resurrection, proclaimed defiantly and hopefully against death's grim reality.

To be clear, we should reject the ways the funeral sermon has been co-opted for manipulative ends. Sometimes this is accompanied by a fevered altar call: *It's too late now for Harry, but it is not too late for you; and like the rich man calling to Abraham from the pits of hell, Harry is crying out to you: "Come to Jesus, now!"* Other times it's gentler but no less manipulative: *If you make a decision for Jesus today, it will bring healing to this hurting family.* This sounds more than a little like unethical salesmen pitching expensive caskets and vaults.

A Christian funeral sermon should not be manipulative. But it should be recognizably Christian.

But I'd also like to reject the practice of having an ostensibly Christian funeral service that is in fact not recognizably Christian at all—at which the scriptures and prayers are just more cut-flower arrangements and the sermon is mostly generalities and pleasantries. The only responses such messages manage to evoke are sentimental pledges to support the family or vague assurances that the assembled will try to stay closer to one another in the future.

Instead, let's reclaim in the pulpit the unashamed invocation of our holy texts and the unembarrassed retelling of our stories. This sort of funeral preaching can make for powerful, prophetic, and evangelistic pastoral care. I have seen this done in profound ways.

Last year I attended the funeral of the grandson of one of my congregation's few Black members. When a small group of us from the church arrived at the funeral home chapel in support of La'Donna, we were among the few White people present. Two weeks prior, De'Andre, age 14, had been shot and killed in gang-related violence. It may have been a case of mistaken identity, or he may simply have been caught in the cross fire.

Some of the family considered that a comfort. I am not so sure. La'Donna and her son still live in contested turf and hear gunfire almost every night. And a few weeks later, another of La'Donna's grandsons was followed, targeted, and shot in a grocery store, though he survived.

At the funeral, a photo collage of the smiling, laughing, video game-playing young man looped on a screen above and behind the casket, where I paused to pray not only for De'Andre, for La'Donna and the family but for the community and the world. I also prayed for the preacher, whoever it would be, tasked with speaking words into and around yet another soul-withering tragedy.

A little while later, the funeral director entered and behind him, a short but elegantly dressed man wearing a maroon suit with decorative gold piping at the wrists and lapels, and epaulets. It was a uniform almost, as if he were an officer in the Lord's army. The Bible he carried was the size of an encyclopedia.

After what seemed like a long time, the large family began to enter. The funeral director had organized them into family subsets: discrete groups of distant relatives first, closer relatives next, the immediate family last.

The preacher stood and began reading verses of scripture. His voice was steady, strong, unhurried: “Behold, I tell you a mystery: we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed. For this perishable must put on imperishability, this mortal, immortality.”

The photo loop continued to play: De’Andre’s face appeared and disappeared. As I had, everyone in the procession looked up at the pictures—until they had to look down at the body. Life, death. Life, death.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. . . .”

Each group paused about halfway down the aisle, so the group ahead of them could draw near and spend time at the casket. There was weeping, wailing, a building squall of grief.

“‘I am the Resurrection and I am the Life,’ says the Lord. ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega.’”

The preacher remained calm and steadfast, and he continued to speak.

“Here and now, we are the children of God. What we shall be has not yet been revealed. But when he appears, we know that we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

For 30 minutes or more, I was transfixed. The procession was ritualized combat. The mourners marched into the valley of actual death, coming face-to-face with the inescapable and, in this case, accelerated and amplified reality of evanescence. But in every ear there sounded the distant triumph song—the steady echo of promise and hope and the life that overcomes death.

This processional drama was in a sense a variation on long-established practice. In many sacerdotal traditions, priests lead mourners toward the altar and to their seats, droning out familiar words of scripture as they go. By facing the mourners, however, the preacher became prophet as well as priest, and his words became defiant God-words.

A few months after De’Andre’s death, another of La’Donna’s grandsons died. Joseph—they called him JoJo—was 22 and died of COVID. I had never met JoJo; La’Donna was the only family member who knew me or our congregation. But this time the family asked to have the service in our sanctuary and for me to preside and

preach.

At the service, when it came time for me to preach, I rose to tell the truth—to apply what I had learned from other funeral preachers who found the apostolic moment in the midst of tragedy and death. “Jesus said, ‘Let not your hearts be troubled,’” I said.

But our hearts are troubled, of course. Yours, mine, ours. We have been extremely troubled for weeks, now, for months, for long years. So much cruelty; so little regard for life. So much injustice.

Jesus said, “You believe in God, believe also in me.” But it can be hard to believe. . . . Or to keep believing when our prayers seem to go unanswered, when we lose the people we love most and no good reason for it, when we are left so bereft that we barely have strength or breath enough to ask why.

And is anyone listening to our questions anyway?

I reminded them that there are times and places when death makes sense: when someone has lived a full life, when illness has taken a hard toll. But in this case, a life was cut short, and death was hard to reconcile with God’s promises. “There is no sense in that kind of death,” I said. “And this family has endured too much of this senselessness, just these last few months.”

I urged them not to say, “God has a reason for everything.” I told them that God does not will the death of a child or inflict suffering on us to see how much we can endure. “We cannot make sense of the terrible things that happen in this world,” I said, “and we often feel alone and isolated, scared and in danger.”

In such moments, I said,

I would humbly invite you to remember another young man, cut down too soon. He was just 33 or so. He ran afoul of the occupying government and the church of that day and was murdered. Crucified. Died horribly.

For a very long time now people of faith have found great comfort in that terrible moment—believing that Jesus did not leave us alone to face the danger but took on our flesh, loved us enough to die our death, that we might take hold of him and live his life. Some of you may remember how God took that horrible injustice—the crucifixion, the death of his son—and in the face of it, worked a miracle called resurrection, a gift he would give to all of us.

The next Sunday, La'Donna embraced me, held on, and said, “You have no idea. Even the doubting Thomases said they were moved. That they may start coming to church here.”

They did not. But months later I got a call from a family regarding their son, Antonio. Antonio had long suffered from schizophrenia and multiple physical illnesses. At age 39, his heart surrendered.

Antonio's mother was a friend of Jojo's family and had attended that service. She said that a “celebration of life” didn't feel quite right. She wanted the same kinds of words spoken over Antonio as I had spoken over Jojo.

Pastoral conversations over the next few days enabled me to come up with some words to say. I understood from Antonio's mother that people who walk in deep darkness need a great light. All who are in the wilderness need to hear about the kingdom of heaven, about joy and peace in the Holy Ghost—the very things that clergy can easily lose our nerve to speak.

I admit, however, that my first impulse was to take Jojo's sermon and simply find and replace one name for the next. It is tempting to default to depersonalizing the funeral sermon, with tropes and clichés and word-processing tricks. Or to go the other way and hyper-personalize it—to make it one more expression of the vanity of imagining that narcissism is a match for death.

Our task instead is to preach the gospel: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the broader context for our particular lives and deaths, our sufferings and tragedies, our blessings and joys. Preaching his story as our story makes the eternal personal and the personal eternal. It eviscerates avoidance, dispels false illuminations, and broadens awareness that comes with the capacity for connection—and mercy. As Peter De Vries said, “Blessed are those who comfort, for they too have mourned.”

Preaching the actual gospel at funerals is a way to weep with those who weep, rejoice with those who rejoice, and feed the hopes of those who recognize that they have to look beyond this moment, this world, this given life and set of circumstances for meaning. It is an opportunity to take our pulpits into cemeteries and funeral home chapels, into hospices and hospitals. To proclaim light wherever there is darkness.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The distant triumph song."

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[Jon Mathieu](#), community engagement editor for the *Christian Century*, discusses this article with its author [Thomas R. Steagald](#).