RAISING THE DEAD

ACTS 9:36-43
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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We are in our third week of our brief tour through the book of Acts during the season of Easter.

I've called this series, "Resurrection on the Move." We're hoping to get a glimpse what it means to live as resurrection people after Easter by looking at stories from the life of the early church.

In week one we saw through the story of Peter before the Sanhedrin that resurrection on the move means **obedience** and **courage**.

In week two we saw through the story of Saul on his journey to Damascus that resurrection on the move means **conversion.**

Today, resurrection on the move means… well, **resurrection**!

Our story today is a story of *life*. Of coming *back* to life. Of the early church participating in the very work of Christ in being *agents* of life.

Perhaps surprisingly, in a sermon based on a story of life, I want to talk today about death.

I apologize in advance ☺.

More specifically, I want to talk about our relationship to death and the effect that the knowledge of death has upon the way that we live.

When I was at Regent College in Vancouver doing my graduate studies, I spent one semester driving out to Abbotsford twice a week to teach an introductory Biblical Studies course for first year students at Columbia Bible College.

On the last day of class, I had an interesting conversation with a young student. She wanted to know why I had presented death as the ultimate "enemy" of humanity in my final lecture. "Why do we need to see death as an enemy?" she asked. "Why not just look at it as a normal part of life and make the most of the time we have?"

At first I was a little taken aback. The Bible does, after all, present death as an enemy and we were concluding a class on Biblical Studies.

It seemed strange in this context for me to have to be arguing that death represented a feature of the world that was not meant to be—an enemy that human beings were created to find unnatural, and to resist and rebel against.

But her view is not uncommon. Steve Jobs, founder of Apple, once declared at a commencement speech that death was the "single greatest invention of life" because it motivates us to make the most of the time we have.

There is some truth to this. The fleeing nature of life *can* make us cherish the time we have and more deliberately. It can help us to celebrate the gift that life is.

But even if we acknowledge that death can remind us of the intrinsic value and goodness of life, we must also say there is clearly a darker side to death as well.

This week, I came across a book that argues that death—or more precisely, our slavery to the *fear* of death—is not the greatest invention of life, but the greatest threat to human flourishing.

It's called *The Slavery of Death*, by Richard Beck, and I'll be leaning on his insights heavily this morning.

Richard Beck is a psychologist at Abilene University in Texas. In his book, talks about how so much of human life is governed by what he calls our pervasive "death anxiety."

What does he mean by this?

According to Beck, "Death is at the center of the human predicament and… the fear of death is the primary source of sin in our lives."[1] He understands this to work in two ways.

First, he uses the term "Basic anxiety" to describe how the fact that we are biological creatures who are subject to disease and sickness and aging leads us to do whatever we can to cling to life.

Combined with the fact that we live in a world of limited resources and find ourselves in competition for these resources with other creatures like ourselves, our biological limitations leads toward survival anxiety. Here's how Beck describes the empirical human condition:

> We all die… and our vulnerability to death makes us fearful, paranoid and suspicious creatures… [T]hese fears promote a whole host of moral and social ills. As vulnerable, biodegradable creatures in a world of real or potential scarcity, we are prone to act defensively and aggressively toward others who might place our survival at risk.

Perhaps this sounds a bit dramatic. You and I are not exactly going to war with each other based on our anxieties about death and scarcity, are we?

Beck argues that this is because, unlike large areas of the planet, our position is one of relative wealth and social stability. He would suggest that if we doubt that the basic death anxiety works it out in these ways, read a newspaper. Or a history textbook.

But for those who aren't driven to sinful behaviour by scarcity or the need to secure biological survival, Beck says there is another category of death anxiety.

He calls this "neurotic anxiety" (cheery guy, eh? ☺).

Even those who don't have to worry daily about biological survival are affected by death in the sense that the inevitability of death exerts an influence on our attempts create meaning and identity in the world while knowing that we will soon be gone.

Beck would say that our desperate attempts to carve out meaning through our vocation or our accomplishments or the accumulation of wealth or our children or our intelligence or even our compassion are all attempts to be remembered, to outlive death.

[1] Richard Beck, *The Slavery of Death* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 27.

We know that death is coming, and so we do everything we can to make a name for ourselves—to be *immortal*—even though we know this is impossible.

What is money, after all, but imagined security in the face of death?

What are riches and accomplishments but an attempt to say to ourselves and others, *I matter! I have value! I'm worth something!*

So, whether it's anxiety about our biological survival in a world that can threaten this on any number of levels (war, disease, chance) or anxiety about doing enough to create a meaningful identity and purpose for our lives before we die, Beck argues that so much of what we do and how we think as human beings is influenced by the fear of death.

We know we will die, and so we struggle and strive and seek our own advantage.

We know we will die so we desperately try to make our lives meaningful.

And all the while the clock is ticking, ticking, ticking…

At this point in the sermon, perhaps you're regretting coming to church this morning. ☺

Let's return to our story from Acts 9.

What is this story about Tabitha's rescue from death meant to teach us? Does it mean that Christians—then or now—should regularly expect to be cheating death?

It sounds silly to even say this out loud because we of course know that this is not the case.

There are nine stories of the dead being raised in the Bible (three from the OT; six from the NT).

With the obvious exception of Jesus, each of the people who are brought back to life in Scripture, whether it's Tabitha or someone else, were all raised to die again.

Stories of raising the dead do not mean that death ceases to be part of our human experience.

The point of the story of Tabitha's healing is not for us to look at it and say, "oh gosh, I wish that would happen to me or to the person I love"(natural as these sentiments are), but to liberate us from the "death anxiety" that Richard Beck speaks of, where we are held in slavery by our fear of death.

They are meant to change our attitude to death and our approach to life.

They are meant to serve as signposts, pointing us to a future where death is no more, and a present where we can be free from this death anxiety.

They are reminders that as followers of Jesus, we are those who do not allow the shadow of death to dictate our way of being in the world.

This doesn't mean that we cease to find death frightening or that we magically become stoics in the face of our own struggles or anything like that.

But it *does* mean that the good news of Jesus is always inviting us to become new kinds of people—people whose future is entrusted to the God who holds them, and whose identities are located not in whatever meaning or identity or importance we can scramble together in our few short decades on the planet, but in our indestructible identities as dearly loved children of God.

Not allowing our lives to be dictated by the fear of death is one thing. But it's not an end in and of itself.

Ultimately, the goal is for our lives to be dictated by something stronger and more lasting and true than the fear of death.

Something like love.

It is so easy and so natural and instinctive and basic to our predicament as human beings to have our behaviour guided by what we are afraid of, and one of the biggest fears we have is death.

But I am increasingly convinced that the central task of being human is to accept the invitation from God to ever increasingly be guided not by our fears but by our loves.

In 1 John 3:14, we read:

> We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death.

In other words, we will know we are moving toward life when we love. When we refuse to love, we remain imprisoned in the fear of death.

In a world of fear and anxiety and desperate attempts to stave off the advance of death, lives of love stand out.

All around us, we see anxiety, scarcity, selfishness, acquisitiveness, slavery to money or pleasure.

We see people doing anything and everything they possibly can do pretend death doesn't exist, whether it's botox or fitness-mania or plastic surgery or workaholics or addictions or chasing after pleasure or building bigger barns or frantically adding to our resumes or churning through a string of relationships that never seem to satisfy...

We humans can be very creative in our death-avoidance.

In the face of this, we Christians who follow a God who raises the dead are to be those whose lives are characterized by the freedom to love freely, generously, expansively, unreservedly.

We are to be those whose identities are guided not by what we're afraid of but by *what* and *how* and *who* we love.

Beck puts it well:

> [W]e are no longer **self-interested survival machines driven by fear**, pushed and pulled by our survival instincts. Neither are we neurotically chasing an illusory vision of "success" as an attempt to matter in the face of death. Rather… we ground our identities in Christ alone and count everything else as "rubbish." And in doing this—in dying to the world—death loses its hold on us, loses its moral traction to scare or shame us. Death has been defeated in the midst of our lives

> and Jesus' resurrected life becomes tangibly present within our own. Slavery to the fear of death has been exchanged for the freedom and capacity to love.[2]

This, ultimately, is the point.

All of life is about moving from people who are dominated by fear to people whose lives are governed and guided by love.

Fear is the primary obstacle to love. The goal of all this is not to become people who are not afraid simply for the sake of not being afraid. It is to become people who are set free to love.

People who are free to understand and live their lives for what they are: gifts given by God to be given away for the sake of our neighbour and the world.

This basic orientation to life can and does look different in different times and places.

There's a glorious scene in a film called *Of Gods and Men*. The film is set in 1996 during the Algerian civil war. Seven monks refuse to abandon their home or their work in caring for the sick and the poor, despite the constant threat of rebel fighters. Even though they could leave, they choose to stay.

Near the end of the film, two monks—Christian and Luc—are in conversation. Luc is determined to continue offering care to all, even the wounded soldiers who are threatening their lives (and who will one day kill them). Christian is advising Luc to be careful about who he serves.

Luc says these words in response:

> *I'm not scared of terrorists, even less of the army. And I'm not scared of death. I'm a free man.*

What a statement!

I wonder if we could apply this attitude to the situations of our own lives?

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[2] Beck, 85.

I have no need to be frantically chasing after that promotion or that award or that recognition. I'm a free man.

I can love those people even though I will probably get no reward. I'm a free woman.

I have no need to impress that person. I'm a free man.

I can jump off the treadmill of consumerism. I'm a free woman.

I can approach my relationships asking, "What can I give?" rather than "what will I get?" I'm a free man.

I can say no to that fleeting pleasure that has left me feeling empty in the past. I'm a free woman.

I can stop micromanaging my kids and demand that that they reflect well on me (and prop up my fragile self-esteem!). I'm a free man.

I can choose to stand with the poor and the despised rather than the influential and the admired. I'm a free woman.

I can be a hopeful person, even when hope sometimes seems like a waste of time. I'm a free man.

I can be seen as naïve and foolish because I believe in a God who raises the dead. I'm a free woman.

I can approach that diagnosis with courage. I'm a free man.

I can stare down death with faith and hope. I'm a free woman.

All kinds of things become possible when we allow God to lead us and reshape us into free human beings whose actions are dictated not by what we're afraid of but by what we love.

All kinds of things become possible when we ground our identities and actions in a God who raises the dead.

The raising of Tabitha is not a template for all mortal humans to look to and expect for our own stories.

It is not a magic trick designed to wow us into the kingdom.

It is a sign pointing beyond itself—a sign that echoes one of the most basic messages that Jesus ever gave his followers: *Do not be afraid.*

You can live lives that are free from slavery to the fear of death. You can love generously and selflessly and freely because you know that your identity is secure in the life of God.

Thanks be to God.