

“Versus Death”

John 11:1-45

www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=john+11:1-45

There’s a show on television that just makes me laugh. I’m not talking about “The Office,” “30 Rock,” “The Daily Show,” or “Modern Family.” Those shows are funny but this show *really* makes me laugh; mostly because it taps into the inner 13 year old in me (no offense to the 13 year olds in the room).

The show is called, “Wipeout,” and it takes ordinary people who are colorful in personality but not necessarily skilled in athletics and pits them against various obstacle courses that have names like, “Boulder Dash,” “Dizzy Dummy”, “Dirty Balls” and “The Dreadmill.”

And these obstacle courses are meant to make you look really silly. Contestants have to make their way over, around, and under large rubber balls, spinning windmills, swinging padded pendulums and surprise doors that swing up to knock you on your toukus.

That’s what makes me laugh. There’s nothing that tickles me more than seeing someone boldly jump and then bounce around like a rag doll until they hit the water below. Add some sound effects like the sound of a punch or a “boing” and I’m rolling.

But really what I think is also interesting about this show is watching how each contestant attempts to make it through the obstacles.

Some will boldly plow ahead hoping to blow past each obstacle unscathed – it rarely works. Others try to finesse their way through, attempting to time each step and move – this too has its limitations. You can’t be too thoughtful or delicate or you will soon be swatted to the water below.

And so, the question for each contestant is this: What’s your strategy? How will you deal with this particular challenge?

The passage that was just read dramatically is a story that many of you have heard before – or maybe you haven’t. It is only recorded in the Gospel of John and it is seen as Jesus’ greatest miracle. At the beginning of the story, we find Jesus on the other side of the Jordan River, the end finds Jesus at a grave and the middle covers everything that happens in between.

Along the way Jesus encounters several individuals who are all wrestling with the same issue: death. And all of them are dealing with death in their own way, like a contestant trying to make their way through a challenge on the Wipeout television show.

The first contestants are The Disciples. When it comes to dealing with death they’re just confused. And who can blame them. Jesus receives a message from Mary and Martha, two women who meant a great deal to him. Mary and Martha’s brother, Lazarus (another good friend), is ill, deathly ill. But Jesus decides to wait, stating confidently that that the sickness will not end in death.

There’s an episode of Seinfeld, where Elaine, one of the main characters, is at a movie theater. She is told that a guy she has been dating has been rushed to the hospital. Well, instead of leaving immediately for the hospital, Elaine decides to stop at the concession stand to get some candy to eat because she’s just famished. And when she finally does get the hospital, her boyfriend asks her where she got the candy from and he is incredulous that Elaine would stop to get Jujufruits before rushing to the hospital. “How could you wait when you knew I was in the hospital?!” he wonders

And I think that’s probably what the disciples are thinking as well, when Jesus does decide to “ease on down” the road to help his friend Lazarus. How could you wait around when your friend is sick on the verge of death?!

They’re even more confused when Jesus says that Lazarus has actually fallen asleep and that he just needs to be awakened. “But Lord,” they say, “isn’t that a good thing?” And, so Jesus just tells them plainly, “Lazarus is dead.” And the disciples are even more confused. We’re confused by the indifference of someone who has the power to heal and then behaves as if he doesn’t care.

How many of us have felt the same way towards God who we believe has all the power at their disposal to heal us. I know there are many of you who have prayed and pleaded that a sickness or a disease be taken away from you or someone you love. You pray and you wait. You pray and you wait. And still there is nothing, no

healing, no decrease in pain, no clean MRI scans, no positive results, no end to that which ails you. God just seems... indifferent.

A couple of years ago a friend of mine died after battling brain tumors for more than a decade. His name was Kyle and six years before his death, we held a prayer service for Kyle. We laid hands on him and his wife and we prayed. We prayed for a miraculous healing and we prayed that God would extend his life. And I remember the verse that his wife shared with us that night, one that had encouraged her and had given her hope for the future. The verse was verse 4 of the passage that was read today, "This sickness will not end in death." And she believed with all her heart that this sickness would not have a fatal end.

Eventually, Kyle got better, but he had trouble speaking. He eventually lost his eyesight, was unable to work and then six years later, he was dead.

I thought it wasn't supposed to end in death. I thought that Lazarus wasn't supposed to die. I'm like the disciples. I'm confused. I'm confused by Jesus. I'm confused by God and death.

And so, those confused disciples head out towards Bethany in Judea with Jesus. And while they are on their way, they are met by the second contestant struggling with death: Martha.

Martha's response is one of disappointment and hope. "Lord," she says, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." You can sense the profound disappointment, can't you? God you got here too late. But I know you can fix this, you can redeem this... can't you? You healed a blind man. Can you fix a cold and lifeless body?

I want you to picture a situation. A child is standing next to you. In his hand is a red helium-filled balloon. He hands it to you to care for it, but the string slips from your grasp and it drifts to the stucco ceiling above. It bounces once, twice and three times, and then bursts with a loud bang. Red pieces shower down on your heads. And the little boy cries out in disappointment and says, "fix it!"

This is how Martha seems to respond to Jesus. It's not anger or rage, there are no accusing fingers; just profound disappointment that the only one who could help her brother came too late.

And I think that's how some of us feel sometimes. We could never be angry with God, and we'd never shake our fist at him, but we just don't understand how that tumor could escape his healing touch. Was a baby too small for him to care for? If he would have acted sooner, maybe the baby would have lived.

Jesus answers her profound disappointment with an assurance: "Your brother will rise again." Martha answers, "I know, Lord, that one day, this will all be fixed."

And then Jesus says one of the most powerful passages in all of the New Testament. "I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me will live." And then he asks Martha, "Do you believe this?" Her answer is equally powerful. "Yes Lord, I believe you are the Son of God, The Messiah." In other words, "I don't know if I can believe what you're saying, but I believe in you."

What a powerful response that is! It's a response of faith when the sorrow from a recent death is suffocating. I can't quite understand why, and I'm not sure if I understand all the theology behind it, but I believe in you. I trust you, God.

The last contestant Jesus meets is Mary. Mary says virtually the same thing that her sister says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." But it's deeper, more sorrowful. Mary falls at Jesus' feet and she weeps in inconsolable sorrow. Death has dropped Mary to her knees. It has kicked her in the gut, sapped strength from her body and filled her with overwhelming grief. And it says that when Jesus sees this, he weeps along with Mary and everyone else who mourns with her.

MSNBC host, Martin Bashir, was recently interviewing Rob Bell, the pastor of Mars Hill Church in Grand Rapids, MI. And he began his interview with the following question: "Regarding the tragedy in Japan, is God all powerful and therefore doesn't care about those who suffer in Northern Japan, or does God care but is not powerful enough to stop such devastating forces?"

And Rob Bell responded this way, "I believe first of all that when we shed a tear, God sheds a tear. God is a profoundly empathetic God who suffers alongside of and with humans in the midst of grief and tragedy."

But Bashir wasn't satisfied, "Which is it - God cares but is not powerful or God is powerful and doesn't care." Rob Bell responded wisely, "I believe this is a divine

paradox.” Perhaps this isn’t satisfying to you, but I think paradox says it best. God is good and powerful but bad things happen. And that’s probably the reason Mary wept. Because she knew and loved her Lord, but she couldn’t understand why he had allowed such a thing to happen.

I had a professor in seminary who told us about a time that he was visiting a parishioner in the hospital who was dying a painful death. The father of the patient stood by the bed, looked at my professor and growled, “Where’s God in all of this?”

And my professor said that in that point he looked up on the wall and was glad to find a Catholic crucifix on the wall rather than an empty Protestant cross. And he pointed to that cross and said, “He’s right there, suffering along with you.” A strange sense of comfort filled the room.

God is with us when we weep and when we face the pain of losing a loved one. It says in Scripture that God is close to the broken-hearted and that he walks with us when we go through the Valley of The Shadow of Death. But John also reminds us that Jesus is moved by our grief, and saddened by our sorrow. He weeps when we weep.

But notice that while Jesus may weep, he is not weak and he is not passive. He doesn’t stand apart – he gets to work.

You can see it in the tone of his voice; it changes. He becomes much more confrontational, ordering them to remove the stone in front of the grave, ignoring Martha’s warning that the body stinks worse than a dumpster behind a fast food restaurant. Jesus prays and then commands in a loud voice that the body of Lazarus come out of its slumber and out of the tomb.

And the man who once was dead, comes out wrapped in his burial clothes. And the tears are dried, the doubts dissipate, faith is restored and people began to believe again.

In that interview with the MSNBC host, Rob Bell pointed out one other thing that he believed about God. He said that the dominant story of Scripture is one of rebirth, of redemption, that God will eventually come and fix this place. That God has not spoken the last word yet. And that in a time of deep tragedy this is the story that we need to cling to: that God is about revealing God’s glory in resurrection – the ultimate sign of victory.

You see, when Jesus healed someone, it reminded people of what the world was and what the world would be. They were hints, glimpses of the supernatural, little snapshots of what our bodies will be. They were clues that something better was coming.

But every healed person will eventually die. If someone’s hand is healed, or their tumors dissolve like alka-selzer, or their chronic pain is soothed, that doesn’t mean that they have somehow cheated death. It’s only been postponed. Death was still going to win!

But when Jesus chose not to heal an illness in his friend Lazarus, let him die and then raised him from the dead. He showed us that healing, while good and amazing, isn’t the ultimate goal – resurrection is.

God may fix our illnesses, our diseases, our booboos and our brokenness, but God’s victory is best seen in the final words of the Bible, in **Revelation 21**, (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=revelation+21) that God will be with us and “he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more,…”

In the end, death will not win! It won’t defeat Jesus! This sickness will not end in death; it will end in resurrection!

This is the hope we have when we read about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead; death may be confusing, and we may be disappointed and grieved because God did not heal the ones we loved. But thanks be to God, in Lazarus, we see that death isn’t nearly as bad and powerful as we thought it was.

There’s an old Southern Gospel hymn called, “Death Aint No Big Deal” and the lyrics go like this:

*Someday I’ll take my final breath
The doctor’ll take one look and say you’re dead
The truth is gonna finally be revealed
Oh, I’m gonna find death aint no big deal*

*He’ll reach down and gently close my eyes
I’ll be watching from the other side
I’ll be laughing ‘bout how scared I’d thought I’d be
Oh I’m gonna find death ain’t no big deal*

*Aint no way to say how good I’ll feel
Let me tell you death aint no big deal
At my Maker’s feet I’m gonna kneel and say
Thank you, Lord, Death ain’t no big deal.*

LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS

For Sunday, April 10, 2011's Sermon

Foundational Scripture: John 11:1-45

www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=john+11:1-45

Featured Scripture Reflection: “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’” – **John 11:25-26** (NRSV) (<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>)

Opening Icebreaker: Create a cross-cultural list of traditions to commemorate or attend to those who have died (i.e. – funerals, burial rites, celebrations, festivals etc.). What reactions have you observed in other people when confronted with death?

Scripture Questions

What is the scripture saying?

- Read **John 11:1-45**. (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=john+11:1-45) What did you notice as you read that story? What words or phrases stand out to you? Did anything bother you? Do you have any questions?
- Read **John 1:1-4, 10-14**. (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=john+1:1-4;10-14) What words or phrases stand out to you when you read this passage? How does this preceding passage add to your understanding of John 11:1-45? Do you have any questions about this text?
- Read **Philippians 1:21-24**. (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=philippians+1:21-24) Compare what Paul's approach to death to Jesus' approach. Compare it to the other characters in the Lazarus story.
- Do any other passages or stories in Scripture come to mind when you read these passages?

How is God speaking through Scripture?

- What is the “Good News” in these passages of Scripture?
- Is there anything you have heard during the discussion that requires some more thought?
- After discussing and pondering these passages, how do these passages make me feel?

God's word

- What is God's invitation to you?

A prayer

God, we commit ourselves to be “resurrection people” who believe that there is life in you. Help us to live fearlessly and courageously in spite of the grief and sorrow around us. Help us to trust that you are stronger than death. *Amen*