

TEXT: John 11:1-45
THEME: Death is not natural
SUBJECT: Death
TITLE: Trust

Fifth Sunday in Lent
29 March 2020
Messiah Moravian
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Death is not natural; it is inevitable but not natural.

This is the startling claim of David Bentley Hart, Orthodox theologian. When death comes, even late in life, “it comes as the interruption of a story that might otherwise have continued to unfold.” Death is an anticipated guest, perhaps, but always arrives out of season. “Death confirms us in our animal nature, but contradicts something essential to our humanity.”

Lucien Lévy-Bruhl was an anthropologist who noted that “primitive” societies often find it impossible to conceive of death as a natural phenomenon. Many anthropologists have written about tribal societies scattered throughout the world that genuinely believe death is always unnatural, and that were it not for the operations of various malevolent unseen agencies, some lives might continue on indefinitely.

Hart’s students snickered upon hearing these stories. “What can you expect from peoples who know nothing about modern physics or organic chemistry?” Hart tried to convince them that this supposedly “primitive” intuition is, in a very profound sense, quite correct, and follows from an insight into the conditions of human experience far subtler than our culture (whose most taxing spiritual labor is watching television) could possibly generate.

Death can never be truly “natural” for us, precisely because we are conscious of it, and so - quite unnaturally - it has a meaning for us, even if we think that meaning to be simply the end of all meaning. True, we are as subject as any other animal to the circle of natural existence, the cycle of birth and death. But, as rational beings, endowed with reflective consciousness, our existence is not simply circular or organic.

To be human is to be open to the future, to a horizon of possibilities that cannot be contained within the limits of nature. We form plans, harbor expectations and ambitions, obey desires that far exceed the present moment. We are capable of novelty, imagination, resolve.

Our consciousness of death constitutes an absolute alienation from the rest of the natural world. Death torments us with the possibility of ultimate nothingness, and so awaits us as that final crisis that makes all life questionable.

If not for openness to the future that at once makes us conscious of our deaths and makes death an interruption of our lives, we would not be subject to either hope or despair, and we would not exist in exile from the natural cycle of life and death. We might even be at peace.

However, Hart concludes, for us there is no “return” to the peace of natural life and death. We would not be human if not for our spiritual exile from the interminable recurrence of the natural order. No matter how tempting it may be to succumb to a “naturalistic” fallacy, no matter what “common sense” might tell us, a deeper spiritual wisdom within us knows who our last and most *unnatural* enemy is. We mortals can never forge a true friendship with the eternal stranger, death.

It is a terribly helpless feeling to watch someone you love be claimed by death. The poet, Donald Hall, watched Jane Kenyon, his wife and also a poet, die of leukemia. When Alice, the minister, visited bringing communion to the house or to the hospital bed, or when they held hands as Alice prayed, grace was evident but not the comfort of mercy or reprieve. The embodied figure on the cross still twisted under the sun.

Mary and Martha know this helplessness as death claims their brother, Lazarus. One way to read this story is from the perspective of the responses to such helplessness. In our powerlessness in the face of death, we cry out with Mary and Martha, “Lord, *if* you had been here our brother would be alive.”

If only you had come sooner. Death’s power to generate “If only . . .” thoughts is second only to its power to separate us from those we love. Mary and Martha’s response to Jesus, when he finally shows up, is aptly expressed in the words of Tori Amos’ song, “God.” God sometimes you just don’t come through. You make pretty daisies but I gotta find out why you always go when the wind blows.

The disciples response to the death of Lazarus is fear for their own lives. Human beings alone verbalize their fear of death. We don’t often say, Dale Allison notes, “It’s my genetic programming that petrifies me.” Instead we come up with all sorts of other explanations for what we feel. The thought of not existing alarms us, the loss of memories haunts us, or the thought of the unknown, the uncertainty of what awaits, unsettles us. Jane Kenyon confided in her husband, “Dying is simple, what’s worst is the separation.”

Another response to death is weeping. Mary weeps and her neighbors weep with her. Jesus weeps. The word translated “weeping” does not mean a muffled cry, but gut wrenching wailing. Donald Hall describes a scene in a Seattle hospital: “in a consultation room, Jane’s hematologist Letha Mills sat down, stiff, her assistant standing with her back to the door. I have terrible news, Letha told them. The leukemia is back. There is nothing to do. The four of them wept.” Weeping is what we do when there is nothing left to do.

Another response is embodied by Jesus. The English translations describing Jesus’ response are often domesticated. Jesus not only weeps with Mary, he is greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. The Greek words carry the notion of anger and distress. Death evokes powerful emotions in Jesus, including anger.

As the story unfolds, Martha and Mary face the grave *with* Jesus. The fear, tears, and anger are not condemned. Rather, they are invited to trust that death does not have the last word. The final word is spoken by the Word of God: “Lazarus, come forth!”

The gospel invites us to trust that across the threshold of death stands One who will call us by name, One who will wrap us in arms of love. The One who raised Christ from the dead will also give resurrection life to our mortal bodies through his Spirit that dwells in us - that makes us distinct from the “natural” order governed by death.

Dale Alison puts it this way: “We’re all immersed in a great Wisdom that we didn’t invent and don’t control, a great Wisdom that’s been with us since birth. Hope in resurrection is the conviction that this Wisdom won’t abandon us as death approaches but will accompany us to whatever awaits us.”