

With Songs and Thanksgiving
By Bishop Graham Rights
September 12, 2021

John 14:1-7

We have been hearing a lot about death in these recent weeks. Every morning, radio broadcasts, television telecasts, and daily newspapers give us the statistics: the number of deaths in the city, in the county, in the state, in the nation, in the world.

Death is often seen as something we just don't talk about. Some years ago, I read a work by psychiatrist and author Edgar N. Jackson entitled, *The Christian Funeral*, in which he observed that large segments of our population are "scared to death of death." [*The Christian Funeral*, p.7]

Well, two thousand years ago, as our Lord talked with his disciples, he wasn't afraid to talk about death. And today, in this time with death so prevalent, our gospel lesson is about an occasion when Jesus speaks to his disciples about death.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled," he tells them. "Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." [John 14:1-3] And later in the same chapter he tells them, "because I live, you also will live." [v. 19]

Followers of Jesus, then, of all people should be able to face the fact of death realistically and fearlessly; we, of all people, should be able to prepare for that eventuality. We should be able to do this because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and what that means. I would go further and say that Moravian followers of Jesus, especially, should be able to face death and to prepare for it.

John Wesley, sailing across the Atlantic, wrote in his diary for January 25, 1736, "In the midst of the psalm wherewith [the Moravians'] service began, the sea broke over, split the mainsail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans [that is, the Moravians] calmly sang on. I asked one of them afterward, 'Were you not afraid?' He answered, 'I thank God, no.' I asked, 'But were not your women and children afraid?' He replied mildly, 'No; our women and children are not afraid to die.' From them I went to their crying, trembling neighbors, and pointed out to them the difference in the hour of trial, between him that feareth God, and him that feareth him not. At twelve the wind fell. This was the most glorious day which I have hitherto seen." [Fries, *The Moravians in Georgia*, 116-7]

One moment in my ministry that I will never forget is an encounter with a church member one Sunday morning before Sunday School. She and her family had moved to North Carolina from Minnesota. The husband had come first and had located a house. He reported to his wife that

there was a Moravian Church a block away, and she, knowing nothing at all about the Moravians, responded, "Let's not get mixed up with that bunch."

On the first Sunday in their new home, however, the couple and their 4 daughters walked to the nearby Moravian Church. They never went anywhere else. All six learned to play instruments and joined the band, and they were also active in many other phases of the church's life. As I approached the wife in the hallway that Sunday morning, I asked about her father, who was critically ill in a distant state. She related that death was drawing near for him; and then, with tears welling up in her eyes but with a radiance on her face, she exclaimed: "Since we have become Moravians, our whole outlook on death has changed!"

I have often thought of her comment - and about what led to that change. Moravians convey our convictions about death in a variety of ways. We live with death for a week each year during Holy Week. We gather for our services with the shadow of Good Friday cast over us, and we meet the cross and Christ's death on it as we gather on Good Friday. And on Saturday, or in some places Good Friday evening, we watch as his body is laid in the tomb.

And then we greet the glorious Easter morn - and do we ever greet it! We are particularly noted for our Easter Dawn service and have often been called the "Easter People." In that service we have been proclaiming the Resurrection faith by word, music, and symbolism for 289 years. As the sun rises for the dawn of a new day, so Christ rose from death to the dawn of new life. And we proclaim in this service that for the Christian, too, death is the dawn of new life. [Hamilton Lectures I, p. 3]

Another witness to our faith and what it says about death is the Moravian funeral or memorial service. Bishop Kenneth Hamilton, delivering a series of lectures in the Southern Province some years ago, in addressing distinctive characteristics of the Moravian Church,

remarked: "I've often said I don't believe there is any other church which in a funeral service has as much singing and as much joyful singing as the Moravian Church, and, if this is true, it is because of the attitude which the early Moravians took that death is really going home; it really is a fulfillment, it is not a loss; and if we believe what the New Testament says I think we must believe this." [Lecture I, p. 3]

Indeed, we Moravians are just following the faith of the New Testament and of the early Christians. In the year 125 a Greek by the name of Aristides wrote to a friend about the new religion that had sprung up in his country. He observed, "If any righteous man among Christians passes from the world, they rejoice and offer thanks to God, and they escort his body with songs and thanksgiving as if he were setting out from one place to another nearby." [George Lloyd, sermon at Thanksgiving Service for Robert Cuthbert, Mar. 2, 1985; p. 15 of *Celebrating Robert*]

"With songs and thanksgiving." The importance of music in the Moravian Church and its use in expressing our feelings and our beliefs is nowhere seen more prominently than in our funerals

and memorial services. Think of the hymns often used at these services: "Jesus Makes My Heart Rejoice" with its third verse:

Should not I for gladness leap,

led by Jesus as his sheep?
For when these blest days are over
to the arms of my dear Savior
I shall be conveyed to rest.
Amen, yea, my lot is blest. [*Moravian Book of Worship*, 662]

And the hymn, "Sing hallelujah, Praise the Lord." And "Ten Thousand Times Ten Thousand" which speaks about

flinging open wide the golden gates and letting the victors in,
the rush of hallelujahs that fills the earth and sky,
the ringing of a thousand harps that bespeaks the triumph night,
the joy that for all its former woes is a thousand-fold repaid,
the raptured greetings on Canaan's happy shore,
and eyes sparkling with joy.

These and other such hymns with their triumphant character express the Moravian - and the Christian - view of death.

The strong chorales our bands play for funerals proclaim this same triumph. During the time that Richard Amos was President of the PEC for the Southern Province, he also served as President of the North Carolina Council of Churches. He once related how he had held a meeting of the Council's Board at Cedarhyrst, the PEC office building which is adjacent to God's Acre in Salem. After the meeting, as the board members were leaving the building,

the band from Home Church arrived at the entrance to God's Acre leading the funeral procession from the church. They stopped to play a chorale, and, when they finished and moved on, a member of the Board, Bishop Joseph Gossman of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Raleigh,

exclaimed, "Now that's the way it ought to be done!"

-In some parts of the world, there is traditional use of white in Moravian funeral services - the color of resurrection and joy. As a minister in Nicaragua I wore a white suit for funerals;

in Herrnhut a white pall is used, even as in many of our own congregations.

Still another expression of the Moravian view of death is that of the hymns of our church which deal with Christ's death and burial. Among the large body of Moravian music, there are many hymns and anthems devoted to this theme. Many were written for the service traditionally held on Great Sabbath, Saturday of Holy Week, the day of Jesus's rest in the grave,

in some churches observed Good Friday evening. Moravians attach great significance to Jesus's rest in the grave and what that means for us. One of the hymns for Great Sabbath says it so well:

Why should we fear to trust the place where Jesus lay?
He'll raise our bodies from the dust, and unto life convey.

Another encounter I'll never forget, took place in Nicaragua in 1982. when I was serving as Executive Director of our Board of World Mission. It was during the darkest days our church experienced in the conflict that raged between the Nicaraguan Government and rebel forces based in Honduras. In Miskito Indian villages along the river that divides the two countries,

fifty Moravian church buildings had been destroyed by the government. The people of those villages had been evacuated into the interior of the country, those, that is, who had not already fled across the border into Honduras. Moravian pastors, who were usually regarded as the local village leaders, were held in deep suspicion by the government; many had been arrested, some had endured terrible tortures, and one had been shot and killed during a reported escape attempt.

While visiting the town of Bilwi/Puerto Cabezas, where many of these were being held, as I was conversing with one of the Miskito Moravian pastors who was not in prison, he related how each Friday morning before dawn, soldiers came to his home and took him away to the local graveyard where they questioned him.

As I returned home, I continued to think about his experience. It was Holy Week, and as I sat in Central Church in Bethlehem for the Great Sabbath Service and reviewed the hymns and contemplated the meaning of the day, I began to realize: for Moravians and for that pastor graveyards are places of strength! We love to go to our graveyards! The remains of our loved ones and of the great saints of our congregations, have been laid to rest there. The grave is the place where even Jesus himself lay; why should we fear that place? A graveyard is a place for fellowship with him and with our departed brothers and sisters in the faith. And I realized, what a tactical error those soldiers were making; they were trying to frighten, but they were taking their captive to a place where he would find strength. It was like throwing B'er Rabbit to the briar patch.

If we share the faith proclaimed by our hymns, by our funerals and memorial services, and by our Good Friday, Great Sabbath, and Easter Services; if we share this faith based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ, graveyards - or memorial gardens - are not places of fear. We can face death. We can think about death. We can talk about death. We can prepare for death.

Preparing for death

a. Preparations

Some people can never bring themselves to make out a will or set down simple basic instructions to be followed at their death. Christian people, of all people, and Moravians of all

Christians, should be able to do these things. In facing our own death, we have a responsibility to our loved ones. There is much we can do now that will later reveal the love and concern out of which we cared enough to make some advance preparations: setting down information they will need to know about location of important papers, for example; noting our preferences regarding our funerals or memorial services, and other such matters. As someone has said: "These are arrangements which can more easily be made when your eyes are dry."

b. Spiritual preparation

But there is an even more important preparation for death that all of us need to make, and we can do that right now. The most basic preparation is to place ourselves in the fellowship of Jesus Christ, who suffered, died, and rose again for us.

In his book, *No Man Is an Island*, Trappist Monk, Thomas Merton, wrote, "If at the moment of our death, death comes to us as an unwelcome stranger, it will because Christ also has always been to us an unwelcome stranger. For when death comes, Christ comes also, bringing us the everlasting life which he has bought for us by his own death. Those who love true life, therefore, frequently think about their death." [in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, 491]

Jesus called upon his followers to cast off fear of death. Listen again to his words to us from the Gospel of John: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." [14:1]

"Believe" - "trust in God, trust in me," says Jesus.

c. Spread the Good News

And in this world with its deep anxieties and fear of death, we can spread the good news of Christ's triumph over death and his gift that we too can participate in that triumph. We can witness by our own actions, even as did the Moravians to John Wesley on the ship to Georgia.

Thanks be to God. Amen.