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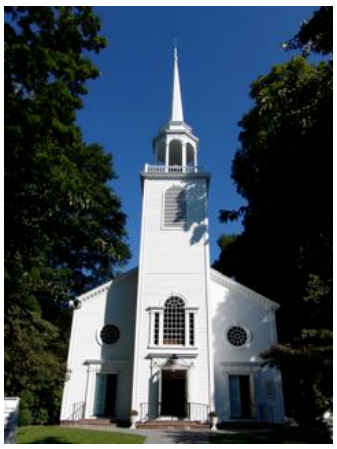

Date: March 15, 2015
Sermon Title: The Tamed Death
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Litany

SCRIPTURE LITANY

Leader: For everything there is a season, a time to be born, a time to die. (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2)

Congregation: Do not sorrow like those who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13)

For faith is being sure of what we hope and certain of what we do not see. (Hebrews 11:1)

Leader: If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord, so whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. (Romans 14:8)

Congregation: For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. (Philippians 1:21)

He will swallow up death forever. (Isaiah 25:8)

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Leader: Where, O death, is your sting? Where, O death, is your victory? Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:55)

Congregation: Yea, though I walk through the valley of the Shadow of Death I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. (Psalm 23:4)

Leader: Let not your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. I am going there to prepare a place for you, that where I am you may be also. (John 14:1-3)

Congregation: Press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus . . . For our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly bodies so that they may be like his glorious body. (Philippians 3:14, 20-21)

Together: Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven not built by human hands. (2 Corinthians 5:1)

I saw a new heaven and a new earth. I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem. And God himself will be with them. God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning. (Revelation 21:1-4)

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INTRODUCTION

Let me say this right now: this is an adult sermon. This is an adult-oriented sermon, a mature and hard topic.

Some years ago, a friend in the community was sick, so somebody suggested having Greenfield Hill Church pray for that person. "Why?" Someone else asked, "everyone Greenfield Hill Church prays for dies." Other than the thousand members alive today, if you took everyone who ever sat in these pews from, say, 1725 to 1925, they are all dead. And all the rest of us will be. So that person is correct. Everyone at Greenfield Hill Church dies.

Here's the idea of this sermon series. In three weeks we have Easter; the church will be packed for three services. We'll tell the story of Jesus, alive, walking and talking with his friends! We'll have great happy music; everyone

will be dressed up; we'll all be thinking of spring and flowers and who knows, even warmth! It will be a great day!

Earlier that week, we'll have Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. There won't be that many in church because on Maundy Thursday Jesus is dying; on Good Friday Jesus is dead, and who likes to think much about dying and death?

Here's my thinking. Easter is more real if we're more real about dying and death. Jesus's triumph over death means more if death means more. But in our world, death means less. And the more we take faith out of death, what we are left with is pretty empty. Which is why Easter is mostly about chocolate, spring, the Easter Bunny. Forgive me for saying so, but when your loved one dies, we don't say, "Have some chocolate." We try, instead, to offer some touchstone to eternal life, whether you believe in heavenly resurrection, earthly reincarnation, or reunion with the cosmos as energy.

To make the most of Easter, we need to think about death. And that's my second point in this sermon series. Dying and death deserve our attention. We need to discuss it, we need to think about it, we need to understand it, we need to preach about it, we need to embrace it. "Embrace it," means to practice it. Prepare for it. I can't think of anything in life experience that doesn't benefit from preparation, and the better the preparation, the more intense the preparation, the more specific the preparation, the better the outcome.

Why are all those baseball teams down in Florida right now? Why do all our high school kids take all these SAT prep courses and AP classes? How do all our successful church people get so successful? How did Alex Beyer, Niles Luther, and Katherine Waugh and Kate Wegener get so good so young?

You know the answer. It's an old New York City joke. Someone asks for directions, "How you get to Carnegie Hall?" And the answer is, "Practice, practice, practice." Well, heaven is our Carnegie Hall, our destination. "A good death," our Carnegie Hall. We'd like both. And you get there by "practice, practice, practice." Practice is preparation. And preparation means planning, thinking through, discussing, embracing, realizing that death comes for all of us.

I went to see an interesting movie the other day, "Mr. Turner," about the great English painter. After a rather eccentric life, he collapses one day by the seashore, and as he lay on his bed, his kindly doctor says, "You are gravely ill. You need to put your affairs in order. Your days are numbered."

To which Mr. Turner replies, "My dear doctor, you should reassess. I do not wish to become a non-entity."

Fortunately, the promise of Christianity is that we never become a non-entity. The promise of love is that we do not become a non-entity. But Mr. Turner's doctor was right. For all of us, "our days are numbered." We should all "put our affairs in order." And one day, we will all "fall gravely ill," whether it lasts but a moment or a decade.

This sermon series is not meant to be depressing. It is said that only two things in this life are inevitable: death and taxes. I have a most wonderful taxman. He gets in touch with me every January to remind me to be ready. He's not trying to depress me. He's trying to prepare me. He's friendly, humorous, helpful, comforting. Yet he doesn't prevent taxes. He doesn't deny its inevitability or its cost. What he does is take the sting out of taxes. That's what I'm trying to do for dying and death. They are inevitable. There is a cost. But as our Scripture said, Christ's Easter takes the "sting" out of it.

I can't cover everything in two sermons. This is just a start, a push toward an ongoing conversation as a church, a family, as your pastors. Issues of euthanasia, quality of life, all the ethical dilemmas of extending life, they are for another day. I urge you to buy *The Art of Dying*. I urge you to attend next Sunday's luncheon discussion that Alida and I are hosting.

Thank you for working through this with me.

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There are some things you don't learn about your spouse until you're married. For example, I married a cat woman. I had no idea she liked cats. To be honest, the problem began with me. Last winter I saw a lonely black cat freezing out in the backyard. So I fed it. To make a long story short, by summer we had seven feral cats. Good luck got us down to two, which Alida adopted, nurtured, mothered, spoiled. She insulated the second floor of the garage. She purchased a two-story cat apartment. She built a two-cat heated bed, a heated food tray duplex by our back door. Into which, last week, moved a raccoon to die. A big, smelly, sick, sad, dying raccoon. He lay there in the heated cat bed house, whimpering; big sad eyes, moving occasionally, to lie on or in the heated cat food tray. All the while, dying. Meanwhile, the cats were troubled, annoyed, frightened. And our lives were thrown into turmoil.

The raccoon's presence, the raccoon's condition, the raccoon's dying — it was sad, and it was inconvenient. Plus I was afraid of sickness or the

raccoon staying there forever and the whole ordeal dragging on for days, weeks, lingering, the suffering, a "death watch" just outside my back door.

I tried everything. I talked to it, scolded it, nudged it, fed it, reached out to it, but I was too squeamish. I didn't want to abandon it, but I couldn't bear watching it, and I couldn't ignore it either. Heck, I don't even like raccoons.

And yet there were three times during its last day that I cried. Silly, yeah, and I'm sure Freud would like to have a talk with me. But life is precious, and seeing life close down, that spark of life sputter and extinguish, that never gets easy. When it was all over, and our raccoon friend had gone to raccoon heaven, I realized that in the hands of a better writer and a better storyteller, I had lived a "Parable of Dying and Death." In one afternoon I had experienced shock, surprise, fear, concern, anger, annoyance, inconvenience, worry, frustration, guilt, sadness, and sorrow.

Jesus went through much the same when his friend Lazarus died, and so do we with the losses in our lives. When Jesus received word that Lazarus was sick, Jesus was busy doing his work. It wasn't convenient; he had other things to do, other priorities. When Jesus finally did get to Lazarus's village, it was too late. Lazarus was dead, and the family lit into him: anger and sorrow and guilt all mixed up with tears. Yes, the Bible tells us, "Jesus wept." Even for Jesus, who knew all about the splendor of heaven, who knew all about the power of life over death, who knew even then that he was abut to raise Lazarus from the dead, even for Jesus, death made him weep.

Sorrow is that deep. In a lifetime of ministry, I have faced every manner of death: of people over 100; of people who endured countless surgeries, endless treatments, unbearable pain; of people who overcame every indignity and suffering and injury; of people who had been dying for years, even decades, by inches; and of people who had lived long, fruitful, exceptional lives; who had filled their bucket lists three times over, who had squeezed every ounce of living out their lives. They were happy and satisfied and ready! Nevertheless, nevertheless, in the best of circumstances or the worst, we want more. One more phone call or visit, one more Christmas gift or kiss, one more Mother's Day or birthday, one more hug or a whispered "I love you," one more of anything, just one more.

Dying is daunting. Dying is never easy, never welcome. It is always sad, always inconvenient, always struggling. Let's face it; if we love somebody, we don't want to let go, we don't want to be let go of. Part of it is the power of love. Part of it is the power of life. Part of it is the love of life.

Our challenge, as Christians, is to have a power of faith equal to the power of love and life. Let our going be less of an ending and more of a sending. Let our going be a *sending*, not an *ending*.

I have done it all, been part of it all. I've been there when the doctor said, "There is nothing more I can do." I've been there in the chemo room as the chemicals poured into a friend. I've been in family conferences as the spouse and children and sometimes parents have to decide what to do, what to say. I've been in the room for the last word, the final breath. I've been there when they "pulled the plug," and held their hands until the flat line appeared. I've been there when the dying spouse says, "I know I'm dying, but please don't tell my wife. I don't want to upset her." Then I go out into the hallway and the wife says, "I know he's dying, but he doesn't know. I don't want to upset him." We mostly hide from it, don't we?

A two-week sermon can't account for every circumstance. We know there is tragic death, sudden death, violent death. We know that. But most of us, 99 percent of us, live out our lives gradually, over time. And little by little, we change, our lives change, our bodies change. We all slow down, we stoop a little. We decline. Even when others are kind not to notice, we notice.

And then one day, a doctor looks us in the eye and tells us the truth. Some part of us doesn't work anymore, some parts can't be fixed. We are not going to get better. We will experience that with someone else first: a parent, a friend, a loved one. Then we will experience it ourselves.

There's a poem at the back of that poetry book in your pew. I think it was my very first poem that went public. It's called "Death Has Come to My Door," and it's an extremely intimate, personal account of what death does to us. "Death Has Come to My Door" can refer to me when my time comes, or to all the others whose lives meant so much to me, and their dying broke into my world. But in all its variety, death comes to our door.

My heart's desire is to be ready, you and I, ready for whatever comes, whenever it comes. To be ready.

People talk about "a good death." Nowadays, that mostly means dying quickly in our sleep—no notice, no suffering, no lingering. When we meet with the family when that's happened, we will all admit that's the easiest way for the deceased but the hardest way for the loved ones. Most of us won't die that way. For most, it will happen over time, slowly, gradually, not catastrophically.

The last two funerals we've had at our church were for men who lived outstanding lives and who entered slowly into their journey toward death, a journey five years or more of active dying.

There is a phrase I came across that I'm suggesting as a better goal then a good, quick death. The phrase is "The Tamed Death." *The Tamed Death*. The idea is that death, "untamed," is brutal and crazy and disruptive. It breaks in and turns everything upside down, makes a mess of things. It disturbs and scatters and frightens. Think of a wild animal, a wild anything that enters your life and threatens everything you hold dear. Then imagine if you could tame it. Bring it under your control. Feel safe around it. That's our prayerful hope as your pastors.

These two sermons are the result of a lifetime, *a lifetime,* of study, research, experience. Decades as a pastor, 10,000 hospital visits, 1,000 or more funerals, and endless study.

One point that I want you to think about is the dramatic difference between how people used to die and how we die nowadays. And the big difference is this: community, *community*. Dying and death used to be a community experience, a neighborhood experience, almost a public experience. Everybody knew about it, everybody kept tabs on it; everybody was involved, everybody was in and out of the house, the room, with the person.

Nowadays, in large part, people die elsewhere, a reality of technology, medical care, and family circumstances, as people live longer and farther away from family and roots. Dying is often isolated, private, removed, even secretive, regulated by concerns about privacy and infection. The role of faith is also diminished, whereas it used to be central. One way that sickness and dying can be "tamed" is to bring faith back to the center of life rather than stuck on the fringe of death.

In my remaining few minutes, let's think about the art of dying. That's an actual concept. Yes, it's the title of the book were pushing, and the theme of next Sunday's adult class luncheon. Go back a few centuries, and the Christian church actually developed an "art of dying," a way of going about the end of our days in the most positive way.

For most of us nowadays, the "art of dying" includes two priorities: I don't want to suffer. I don't want to be a burden. The first, medicine can do something about, within reason. It's called "palliative care." Keep pain away. The second about being a burden oversimplifies things. Your life matters. You matter. The end of your life matters. So stop worrying about being a burden. Let us fret. Let us hover. Let us care. Let us in. That's love, too.

I've summarized the key points in *The Art of Dying*, blending thoughts from here and there on the list at the end of this sermon. But let me summarize the summary. Dying is work. *Dying is work.* Think of whatever you've done in your life that you're proud of, you at your best. Some high points in your career. Special moments in your youth. Family accomplishments. Success in your areas of interest. I'll bet they all took work. Whenever you were at your best, it took work. Why not go out the same way? Doing your best.

Ask yourself: how do I want to die? And then do it. I'm not referring to the method, but to the path, the way, the *spirit* of reaching the end. That's very individual. Very personal. It can be quite different for each of us. But what my little lists provide is sort of the wisdom of the ages, how to tame death so it isn't wild and out of control.

When we use our time, however limited, when we use our energy, however limited, when we use our resources, however limited, when we use our faith, however limited, we take away the fear and bring ourselves to peace. And that takes work. Work got you to where you got in life. Let work get you to where you need to get at the end of life.

Obviously I'm not talking about the things you can't control. If you're golfing at the Patterson Club and a meteor hits you on the head, at your funeral I'm not going to say, "He should have planned better." But aside from meteors, there is much we can do to live our dying more fully.

The sermon is for the two sides of dying: when others are dying who are near and dear to us, and when we begin that journey. I think the bottom line for both is don't be a spectator, be a participant, be involved in all the dyings of your life. When others are dying, there is no substitute for presence and prayer. Presence . . . being there. And prayer . . . inviting God's presence. You are the one your loved one is leaving. God is the one s/he is going to. Both need to be present

The other active part of dying is conversation. What is it you need to say? What is it you need to hear? Who is it you need to talk with? On that page of lists and resources, I quote one list that says that when we are dying, there are four things everyone needs to say:

1. Please forgive me . . .
2. I forgive you . . .
3. Thank you . . .
4. I love you . . .

I suppose all four can be specific or left general, but each one gets you thinking. And whether you do it face to face or in a YouTube video or in your head or to God in a prayer, it starts a powerful conversation, doesn't it? The idea is to clear the deck, do away with regrets, set you free. That's the only way to face any future, even eternity. No baggage.

The Art of Dying puts it in more formal, classic terms taken from centuries of Christian faith practice, but it's just as powerful:

1. Acknowledge what's happening, dying.
2. Recollect what's important.
3. Ask forgiveness.
4. Offer your final thoughts and encouragement.
5. Express your faith in Christ and in eternal life.
6. Take your leave.
7. Commend your self and your loved ones to God.

I can shorten the list: Be honest with yourself. Be loving with others. Be public with your faith. Turn the rest over to God.

Last Sunday there was a single red rose in a vase on the altar in honor of Len Morgan, a great soul in the life of our church. We would all agree that Len taught us how to live and how to love. His love affair with Essie, his love affair with ASP, his love affair with our church, his love affair with God were all lived publicly and joyfully.

Len also taught us how to die. He shared the journey, he invited us in. He combined gallows humor with total faith. He was there, front and center, when we named our youth barn the Len Morgan Youth Barn. And at the end, he came to our Thursday night SPF youth group, sat on the couch like everyone's grandpa, as teenagers came over one by one for a final hug and a great smile. He continued to receive kids and friends in his home almost to the final day, nothing hidden. Just a wonderful life coming to a loving end, lived out in his beloved community of family and faith.

We can do that. Nothing I said today minimizes the sorrow of parting. That's real. Nothing I said takes away pain or answers unanswerable questions. That's real. But just as real is our living faith. We can live our dying days to show we know where we are headed. And let everyone know that our END is just the BEGINNING.

Then Easter really IS better than chocolate.

4 Things Everyone Needs to Say

- Please forgive me…
- I forgive you…
- Thank you…
- I love you…

7 Things We Can Do for the Dying

- Presence
- Compassion
- Presence
- Time
- Presence
- Pray
- Understanding

The Art of Dying

- Know it is coming, express willingness to die
- Recollect what is important
- Ask forgiveness
- Show your faith in Christ, and hope in eternal life
- Offer final thoughts and encouragement
- Take leave
- Commend yourself and your loved ones to God
- Turn it all over to God

Resources:

The Art of Dying, Rob Moll
The Hour of Death, Philippe Aries
Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End, Atul Gawande
On the Web: Ellen Goodman's "The Conversation Project"
theconverstationproject.org (also on Facebook)