

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: March 22, 2015
Sermon Title: The Tamed Death, Part II
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Litany

SCRIPTURE LITANY GOD'S GIFT OF LIFE

- Deacon: Our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope. *1 Chron. 29*
- Congregation: My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and they come to an end without hope. *Job 2*
- Deacon: My days are swifter than a runner; they fly away without a glimpse of joy. *Job 9*
- Congregation: My days are a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing. Each person's life is but a breath. *Psalms 39*
- Deacon: The truly righteous person attains life; along that path is immortality! *Proverbs 11*
- Congregation: Love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself. Do this, Jesus said, and you will live. *Luke 10*
- Deacon: Our Savior Christ Jesus has destroyed death, and he has brought life and immortality to light. *2 Timothy 1*
- Congregation: We have passed from death to life because we love one another. *1 John 3*
- Deacon: I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes in God has crossed over from death to life! *John 5*
- Congregation: If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come. *2 Corinthians 5*
- Deacon: I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. *John 11*
- Congregation: I am the Resurrection and the Life! *John 14*

INTRODUCTION

Let me say this again: this is an adult sermon. This is an adult-oriented sermon, a mature and very difficult topic.

My very first funeral as a pastor was for a stillborn baby, with an open casket. The baby's parents were 16-year-old unmarried kids, and their parents ordered the open casket to punish the kids for having a baby before marriage. I'd been a pastor for one whole week. I was too immature to question what was going on, but that horrible experience woke me up, and ever since I have always asked these questions: What is this funeral for? Who is this funeral for? Why do we do what we do with death?

Last week I impressed upon you that you really should listen to me about death and dying because I am so experienced. With all my hospital visits with the sick and dying and all my funerals, I know my stuff. I should have mentioned that I'm also a hypochondriac. I am always dying.

We've been married four years now, and each year I've announced to Alida that I have some terminal disease, and I sit her down and go over my wishes. I also hate flying. *I hate it.* So every trip includes the same routine: a deeply serious conversation about what to do when I don't make it back. What to do with my books, my teacup collection, my old sermons, the kids, the car, and my remains. It's a particularly hard conversation because Alida is always sitting on the couch, trying very hard not to giggle.

I guess what I'm confessing to you is that my experience *and* my personal peculiarities have made me practiced at putting life in perspective. And that really is "the art of dying (and death)": seeing things in perspective, planning things in perspective, being intentional, being ready.

Last week I emphasized dying, that period between when you are not well, you're not getting better, and the end of your days. How do we face that? How do we deal with it? Of course, I'm really talking about the two sides of dying: ours and somebody else's. Most of us first face the dying and death of someone else. And at some point, we start to face our own. My goal is to help all of us face this before we have to, while we have control, face it while we can think it through, talk it through, face it so we can make the most of it. To summarize that sermon: use the end of life well. Complete yourself.

Today, our emphasis is *death*. The life of your loved one is over, or your life is over. Now what? What we decide and what we do say a lot about our priorities, our faith, and even our relationships.

Let's imagine a military funeral. Sgt. Joe Smith dies in January. He served his country faithfully. His funeral is scheduled for March 16. But it's spring break, so a lot of the family and friends can't be there. The White House sends a flag by regular mail, so it doesn't arrive until three days late. The military color guard shows up in jeans and T-shirts; one of them forgets his rifle. Taps is to be played on a CD, but nobody has a CD player, so we skipped that. John wasn't that religious, but there is an old high school buddy who reads the lyrics to Joe's favorite song, something by Bon Jovi. Then folks go home.

Of course, that's not how the military does it, is it? They treat the death of each veteran with the utmost respect. Two young soldiers accompany the flag, meticulously dressed in crisp uniforms. With elegance and dignity, they march in step to the casket, lift the flag and with almost heart-wrenching deliberation, they carefully fold the flag into the traditional triangle. One soldier then steps forward, takes the flag to the family, kneels down on one knee, presents the flag to the loved ones, then stands tall and gives one last, slow, powerful salute. The riflemen snap to attention, lift their rifles toward the sky, and do a three-shot salute in unison. Off in the distance, a bugler plays taps. It is as if the world stops, and 330 million Americans say with one voice, "Thank you . . . your life matters."

If you learn only one lesson from today, here it is: life matters. Each life matters. Take the time to show it.

On Tuesday the Mitri and Lauf families took us to "The Late Show with David Letterman." I had never even seen the Letterman show. I'm still back in the Jack Parr, Dick Cavett, rotary phone age. So this was a whole new experience. The show is filled with humor. Everybody is in a good mood. The show itself is about an hour long. It turns out that it's the hour *before* the show that is key to the show's success, and they make that very clear. The announcer comes out with this *great announcer voice* and explains the importance of the audience. He trains us in applause and stages competition between the balcony and the main floor. Then the band comes out, gets the place jumping, and pumps us up!

Then they show us a video featuring Alec Baldwin, telling us how important we, the audience, are. We set the tone . . . We give the show spirit . . . Without us, there is no good show! And Alec Baldwin says, "If you think a joke is funny, clap loud. If you don't think it is, still clap, because it really is funny. And if you are certain it's not funny, go talk to your pastors, and they will explain it to you!"

Then Letterman comes out to bond with us because by now we know, we, the audience, we are the real stars. And when the show starts, boy, do we clap, we applaud, we fill the old Ed Sullivan Theater with positivity!

Which got me to thinking, wouldn't that be great if our church did that? Have someone come out each Sunday, warm you up, pump you up, convince you that you are the key to a great sermon, get you to respond, laugh, agree that all my stories, all my wisdom, the whole sermon is brilliant? And, like Letterman, still get done in an hour?

Then I realized: Letterman was doing a 10-minute comedy routine about Reese's Peanut Butter Cups; I'm doing 20 minutes on death. Not much room for applause here. And yet, there is this similarity between Tuesday's Letterman and Sunday's Greenfield Hill Church: both are designed to make you happy. A two-week series on death and dying is worth it only if we believe we have something to offer that changes the heartache, the pain, the sorrow of life's biggest challenges into something with a glimmer of hope. This is worth it only if you leave here feeling better, even happier, about death and dying.

That's a tall order, but if I can't do that, what am I here for? Why even have a church? My sermon isn't meant as an answer to atheism. That's another challenge for another day. These sermons operate on the premise that everyone here has at least a tiny sliver of faith. We are not all perfectly formed religious beings; each of us is somewhere along the spectrum of faith. You may remember that Jesus affirms the power and the significance of each tiny little itty-bitsy mustard seed of faith. So that's where I start. And it is from the foundation of faith that we leap into the mysteries of life and death and afterlife.

There are two central teachings of Christian faith:

1. You are loved.
2. There is eternal life.

Or we could put it this way:

1. Jesus died for your sins.
2. Jesus rose from the dead.

The bottom line is still the same. Because you are loved, you are forgiven. And because you are forgiven, there is resurrection for you!

Biblically, it comes out this way: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall have eternal life." (John 3:16)

God's motivation is love. God's action is Jesus. God's result is our eternal life. If I don't believe that, then I've got nothing. If we don't believe that, all we are left with is walking around saying, "Tough luck" whenever someone is in the embrace of sickness or death. "Oh, you have cancer? Tough luck." "Oh, your friend died? Tough luck." We might not put it that bluntly, but a lot of our behavior and attitude about dying and death has the same feel as "Tough luck." People say, "Get over it . . . move on . . . take a pill." We can't be bothered with all the complexities of dying or the perplexities of death. We want them removed, sanitized.

My father was also a pastor, and his wife, my mother, died late on a Saturday night, so we were all at my father's church the next morning for Sunday worship. That very morning people were already trying to fix him up! What they were really trying to do was *fix him*. Put it all behind him. Get it over with. All the messiness of death is too much. Let's hurry it along.

We can't do that. Death is too important. I said last week that the big difference between how we face dying and death nowadays from how folks faced it in the old days, the big difference is *community*. Once upon a time, the whole neighborhood—not just the family—the whole community, the whole village, the whole church was involved in the process of dying *and* in the follow-up to death. People gathered around, went in and out of the house, the funerals were in the church, the whole town would turn out, the burial would be in the church cemetery right adjacent to the church. As a result, every time you went to church, every baptism, every wedding, every Christmas Eve, you walked by all the loved ones of your past. You were reminded of every loss you ever faced. And that was a good thing.

I like some of the old ways. Forgive me for not sounding like a New England Congregationalist for a moment. Two years ago Alida and I went to Belgrade, Serbia, the old Yugoslavia, to visit Brigitta. Each morning I got up very early to walk the streets of Belgrade. Some others were up, so I followed them. It turns out they were headed to church. So each morning I went to an old Serbian Orthodox Christian church—dark, smoky, filled with icons, priests chanting in a foreign language, everyone standing, no chairs.

To tell you the truth, for a change of pace I liked it. And what I liked the most were these big boxes in the back of the church, sometimes outdoors, filled with sand. For a tiny donation you could purchase a candle, light it, stick it in the sand, say a little prayer for some loved one.

Something about the sand and the candle and the light and the prayer—it all worked. Every day there were 15 or 20 candles in the sand. I saw old people put them in; young people, teenagers, each remembering someone. We were a little community; we'd even nod at one another, smile, each with our private injury, each still carrying a memory, and somehow it felt good to show that life still mattered. Why not? It has to be better than saying, "Tough luck."

This may be an extreme story, but before Alida came here, she was a pastor at the historic Center Church on the Green in New Haven, one of the first churches in America, which is built on top of the church cemetery. Literally on top. In other words, in those early days, you'd be sitting right on top of your grandmother's grave! The result of the old way was an intimacy with death. It was not only real, it was also natural and was experienced in the midst of life and surrounded by faith. You couldn't miss the fact that life goes on, and eternal life comes soon.

My own lifetime has been lived with some of the traditions of the old ways. When I grew up in Queens, when somebody on the block died, immediately a wreath was hung on the door. Just as immediately, neighbors began to cook, neighbors came to the house carrying casseroles, neighbors took up a collection.

In my early days as a pastor, I still did "house funerals." The deceased lay in the casket in the front room for two or three days. People dropped in whenever—morning, noon or night—to visit, and the body was never left alone.

In those days, right up into the '80s, when we drove in a funeral procession to the cemetery, all along the route, women on the sidewalk dropped to their knees, men took off their hats, everyone—complete strangers—paid their respects. Death mattered. Death was worth stopping for. Not anymore. Death isn't worth stopping for anymore.

Now, forgive me, I'm making generalizations. Of course, there are funerals where everybody rallies, everybody takes time, everybody pitches in. This church has been home for many great funerals. Our church committees have jumped in to arrange receptions for hundreds of guests. People have opened up their homes, their hearts, their checkbooks.

We can all remember when things were done right, many times. But in general, more and more, all too often in our society, there is a trend that death isn't worth much effort. I see it in a hundred ways, but I will illustrate with just one funny story.

I had a funeral once at that beautiful historic Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn. I drove there in the hearse with the funeral director, and as we approached the grave, there were dozens of gigantic limousines, stretching out for what looked like a mile. But when I got to the grave, there were only about eight people there. You see, all the limos were empty. *Empty*. People had gotten together to rent limos and on the back window was a piece of paper listing all the people who paid for the limo, but they were too busy to actually attend.

That trend hasn't caught on yet, but you can virtually attend funerals, virtually attend wakes, even virtually light a candle—all on your computer. You don't have to inconvenience yourself at all. More worrisome are people who themselves decide, "I don't want to be a bother, just put me in a box and bury me. I don't want a service. I don't want visiting. I don't want people standing around, talking about me."

In other words, sometimes we treat others as if they don't matter, and sometimes we treat ourselves as if we don't matter. When that happens, we are missing a big fact that goes back to what I said about "community." When death happens, the community is injured. The dead person is dead; no more pain or suffering. But the community around is NOT dead. When somebody we care about dies, we are in pain, we are suffering, we hurt. Our community is injured.

That "community" may be small; it may just be a neighbor, a niece, one old friend. I've done plenty of funerals when just one person was there, but that person was hurting. Or the community might be enormous. Some deaths touch large swaths of people. The wakes have lines out the doors; the funerals are standing room only. The family is stunned. They'll say, "I didn't even know most of these people," but that life touched a large community.

I remember Emma Von Euler's funeral and Beth Davis's funeral, two very different women whose funerals filled this church. Emma was just a teenager. Beth was a mom, a fairly private person. Both Emma and Beth affected an enormous community. Emma, with her music and zest; Beth, with her compassion and volunteering. Their deaths hurt our community. We were quite literally "injured," broken.

Well, what do you do with people who are hurting? I suppose we could have sent empty limos or lit a virtual candle. Or maybe you do what you always do when someone is injured. You look for healing. If someone is really injured, broken, you give the wounded parts support: a brace, a crutch, a hard cast, a soft cast. Something to guard you until you're stronger.

Every death injures the community. Whether a small family or a circle of friends, a whole church or an entire town, death leaves hurt. To ignore that is even more hurtful.

I want you to listen to this sentence, and I must confess, I've done so much prep for the sermon, I can't remember whether I said this or found it in a book. Here it is: "Nobody cares about your death as much as you. And there is at least one person who will be devastated by your death. So if you think it is no big deal, think again."

You owe it to yourself and to that person who is devastated. You owe it to make it a big deal. Now, *how* you make it a big deal is up you, your personal taste. But you—or let us, Alida and me, or your family, let us—put some thought into it, some oomph, some spirit . . . some love. Let's do it right for your sake and our sake, for your injured community that needs to remember *and* to heal our hurt.

Maybe you've already read what I put in the bulletin:

The Purpose of the Funeral

1. To honor the deceased.
2. To help the sorrowful.
3. To celebrate our faith.
4. To use our faith to help the sorrowful to honor the deceased.

Here's my promise, 100 percent money-back guarantee: if you let us do all four for you, for your friends, for your loved one, for whomever, if you let us do all four, we can accomplish Jesus's promise "to heal the brokenhearted." We can take away "the sting" of death and put a smile back on each face.

Ten years ago or more you let me go on a sabbatical for a month. I used the time to finish my first book of poetry and to study religious art. First, I headed into the great museums in New York, then off I went to Prague. I spent hours, days, scouring the museums, looking at great art by the great masters as they tackled Biblical themes. Clearly, the main theme is the triumph of *life* over death. And to do that the artists who painted them, the churches that housed them, the museums that now show them, to do that they first show death in all its starkness, and then, Life, Easter, Resurrection, Heaven in all its triumph.

The death paintings could not be more bleak: the crucifixion, then the "lamentation," when Jesus's body is taken off the cross and held for a moment in the arms of Mary or Mary Magdalene. You see, you feel the

sorrow, the emptiness, the deep, deep, deep sense that all is lost. Yes, there is love there, among the pain, but you never see any hope. There is no faith there. He is dead. It's over. But wait . . . look around, just to the right, there is a Resurrection painting: Jesus triumphant, angels rejoicing, friends and family startled into faith!

That's the power of Easter; that's the power of faith. Every dying and death begins with the starkness, the emptiness, the loss, as we imagine the end of life, the end of relationship, the end of togetherness, the end of now.

Every dying and death is just like Jesus's. Into that great hurt, into that broken and injured community enters the stupendous triumph of Easter, of God's love over death. Why deprive ourselves of that magic, that mystery, that miracle?

I don't mind admitting that our church is a mix of magic, mystery, and miracle. I can't explain it all, but I need it, I use it, I like it. When I go into New York City and do a lot of walking, I use a cane. Why? Because it hurts more when I don't. It may not be fashionable. It may be an admission of weakness. But I'd rather walk with it than limp along without it. So maybe Christian faith isn't fashionable right now. Maybe it's a sign of weakness. But when I find myself in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I walk better with it. Give me my cane.

One last thing, I promise. You know, we often sing what we would like to believe. It's like the seventh inning at Yankee Stadium, when 50,000 people stand to sing *God Bless America*. There are black people, white people, Asians, Hispanics; cops, millionaires, beer vendors. For 45 seconds, one big happy family, the way we believe America can be at our best.

We do the same with our faith. We sing more than we can explain:

When the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there . . .

*Oh, when the Saints go marching in,
When the Saints go marching in,
Oh, Lord, I want to be in that number
When the Saints go marching in . . .*

*Swing low, sweet chariot,
Comin' for to carry me home . . .*

*In the sweet by and by,
We shall meet on that beautiful shore . . .*

*Oh, Beulah Land, sweet Beulah Land,
As on thy highest mount I stand.
I look away across the sea,
Where mansions are prepared for me
And view the shining glory shore,
My heav'n, my home forevermore!*

Hand me my cane.