

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church – Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
The sixth Sunday after Pentecost
June 30, 2024
Sermon by Pastor Christopher Pflughoeft
Death, be not proud

²¹ When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. ²² Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet. ²³ He pleaded earnestly with him, “My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live.” ²⁴ So Jesus went with him. ²⁵ While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. “Your daughter is dead,” they said. “Why bother the teacher anymore?” ²⁶ Overhearing what they said, Jesus told him, “Don’t be afraid; just believe.” ²⁷ He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. ²⁸ When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. ²⁹ He went in and said to them, “Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.” ³⁰ But they laughed at him. After he put them all out, he took the child’s father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. ³¹ He took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha koum!” (which means “Little girl, I say to you, get up!”). ³² Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. ³³ He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.

– Mark 5:21-24a, 35-43 EHV

So... are you ready to die? This is a question that was posed to the caravan of teens that went with us to the WELS Youth Rally this past week. We didn’t ask them this way. Instead, the question was presented to the families through the form of a liability waiver.

Teens do not always think about death. As we get older, the question becomes more real. Are you ready to die? It is normal for humanity to fear death. There is a lot of unknown tied to death. People don’t typically come back from death to tell us what it was like. Will it hurt? How will it happen? How long will it take? Those are probably some of the smaller questions. The bigger questions may be; What would happen to my family? Are my affairs all in order? And the devil wants us to ask, Am I actually right with my God? Where would I go?

The unknown aspects of death can cause a lot of fear. Yet, it is not that alone that causes death to be so painful. The biggest problem with death is that it is not natural. God did not create us to die. Sure, everyone dies. Yet, that is not how it was supposed to be. God created humanity to live forever. Death is an unnatural invader that has come as consequence of sin.

Today, we see a top-down truth from God about death. Although it is normal to fear death and believe that it has won, the truth that comes from God is that our view of death can be different. Jesus defeated death through his own death and resurrection. Now, we can have confidence in the face of death. This is certainly an upside-down view according to our world.

In Christ Jesus, a Christian can address death and tell it to back off. We stand in the loving power of the one who defeated death. This is as John Donne, a sixteenth century English minister and poet, did in his famous poem, Sonnet X. Donne, who faced his own potential death with illness was able to reprimand death itself in Jesus. Donne wrote:

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;

For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

These are powerful words from a man who was given confidence from Jesus. He knew that death was defeated. He knew that death was only a short sleep. Therefore, he could reprimand death.

Brothers and sisters, you too can reprimand death. Because of Jesus, you can say, as Donne wrote, Death, be not proud. You can say this because Jesus comes with you when death arrives. You can say this because Jesus holds your hand in death's stead. Today, I encourage you to look death in the face and to reprimand him. Death, be not proud.

Yes, say to Death... Death, be not proud because Jesus goes with me when you come. In our gospel today, we see this fact so clearly. When death comes to wreak his havoc, Jesus comes with those who face the pain.

Jairus was a leader of the synagogue. This means that he was an important man in Jewish society. This also means that he should have known God's Word well. Although an important person himself, death still came for Jairus' family. Likely, also the fear and the pain that follow death.

We do not know many details about Jairus' daughter's illness. We do not know what it was. Evidently, though this was a severe problem. Jairus knew that proud ole Death was coming for his daughter. As a father of four, I can only imagine what this man was going through.

In the face of this intense pain, Jairus knew to whom he should go. Jairus, perhaps having seen Jesus' restorative power before, knew that he needed to go to Jesus for help. So, that is exactly what he did.

Even in the face of this immense pain, Jairus had hope and comfort from Jesus already. This is not necessarily seen in our English translations. The verbs that Jairus used in speaking to Jesus are classified as subjunctive. This verb form expresses his hope. Although Jairus' daughter was very sick... Although Jairus still had not seen Jesus heal his daughter... Jairus could speak in a hopeful way.

What gave Jairus hope? Jairus could have hope because Jesus would go with him when death came. I think one of the biggest statements in this whole reading could seem like a passing word if not considered more closely. First, Jairus says to Jesus, "Please come and place your hands on her so that she may be healed and live." Then, Jesus does not say anything to him. All Mark records about Jesus' response is "Jesus went with him."

Death came to Jairus to wreak havoc in his life. Death threatened Jairus' whole world. In the face of this threat, Jesus went with him. Jairus could speak hopefully because of Jesus. Jairus could say, "Death, be not proud because Jesus goes with me when you come."

You do not need to fear death. Now, don't get me wrong here, I am not saying that we are not to mourn the death of a loved one. As I said before, death is not natural. God did not create us to die. Death is a consequence of sin. We know that all have sinned because all die. Losing a loved one is hard. God does not say that he will cease our mourning in this life. In the next life, he will wipe every tear away. Today, grieving is normal. Today, we, like Jesus, will weep when a loved one dies.

But, do you tremble in the presence of death? This is what feels natural. It feels normal to be afraid of death. When we fear death in such a way, this could indicate an inner problem. This is a demonstration of a sinful distrust in the God who has defeated death. So, if you mourn death, that is okay. If you prepare for death, this is okay. But to tremble in the presence of death because of a lack of trust in the God who defeated death on the cross is sin.

Jairus had the hope that came from Jesus alone when Death showed his ugly head. Jairus went to Jesus for support. Jesus went with him. When death comes to hurt in the way that he does, remember that Jesus defeated death. On the cross, Jesus paid the price of death in full. On Easter Sunday, Jesus rose from the grave. Jesus went to death and came out victoriously. Jesus has defeated death. God gives Christ's victory to you. You, and all who trust in Christ Jesus, have hope in this face of death. This is the hope of eternal life. You too can say, "Death, be not proud because Jesus goes with me when you come."

Children, when Grandma goes to hospice care, Jesus goes with you and her. Parents, when your child goes to the hospital, Jesus goes with you and her. Those whose loved ones are fighting cancer, when they go to treatment, Jesus goes with you and them. When Death comes, Jesus goes with you. When Jesus is with you, remember what this means. This is as Paul wrote in Romans 8, "Indeed, he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also graciously give us all things along with him?" (Romans 8:32 EHV) Jesus goes with you. Jesus defeated death. Certainly then we shall say, "Death, be not proud."

Jairus' may have felt that his hopes were dashed when they returned to his house. When they returned, people informed Jairus that his daughter had died. These people unfortunately did not have the hope that Jesus gives when death comes by. They said, "Don't bother the teacher anymore."

Praise God that Jesus is not just the teacher. In the face of this doubt, Jesus proclaimed confidence for Jairus. Jesus said, "Do not be afraid. Only believe." These people perhaps failed to realize that this teacher is the God of the universe. This teacher has power over death.

Following this, Jesus cleared the room to have a more intimate moment with a few of his disciples and the little girl's family. In their presence, Jesus said something that would have been shocking. He said that she was not dead, she was only sleeping. How could this be? Were they mistaken in their diagnosis? No. But to Jesus, death is only a sleep. Jesus delivers people from the dead.

Next, Jesus grasps the, perhaps cold and limp, hand of this little girl. When death had come, Jesus held her hand. Then, Jesus spoke. Jesus said, "Talitha, koum!" Then, that is just what happened. Jesus caused this little girl to arise from the sleep of death. Then, to prove how truly alive she was, Jesus told people to get her something to eat.

Jesus instructed Jairus and his family not to tell anyone about this. I wonder if they listened to these instructions. Nevertheless, Jesus gave them the power to say something else. They could say, "Death, be not proud because Jesus holds my hand in your stead."

We have already laid out clearly that it is normal to be fearful of our own death. The uncertainty causes fear. The potential pain causes fear. The devil's lies cause fear. Jesus, however, gives us reason not to fear. When we fret because of the fear of our own death, that demonstrates a lack of trust in God. That is sin. We must repent of our sins.

In repentance, look to Jesus' cross. On the cross when Jesus died to defeat death, he also shed his blood to wash your sins away. You are forgiven for your distrust and doubt. You are forgiven when you tremble at the fear of death. In Jesus, you have eternal life.

Brothers and sisters, I do not know when Death will come knocking on your door. I do know though that Jesus will hold your hand when death comes by. How will he do this? God does not promise that you will receive healing in this life. He does not promise that you will have a story like this little girl. When death comes by, Jesus holds your hand through the form of a fellow believer, a family member or pastor, sharing Christ's word with you. Through the Word, the Holy Spirit strengthens you and connects you to Jesus. As it is written, "So then, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message comes through the word of Christ." (Romans 10:17 EHV)

Death will come to you brothers and sisters. When death comes, Jesus will be there holding your hand. Through the word and the sacrament, strengthening you. He encourages you. He tells you about eternity in heaven. He tells you that he will take you to be with him. When death comes, Jesus says to you, "Do not let your heart be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. 2In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you. I am going to prepare a place for you. 3And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to be with me, so that you may also be where I am." (John 14:1-3 EHV)

A liability waiver may cause you to think of your own death. The question is, do you fear death? You do not need to. You can say, "Death, be not proud because Jesus goes with me when you come and he holds my hand in your stead." When your loved ones get sick, Jesus gives you comfort. When your own life is threatened, Jesus gives you certainty of eternal life. Amen.