

LET'S ALL DIE TOGETHER

Acts 9.36-42 *Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive.*

THE LAST TIME anyone saw Tabitha alive, she was weeping.

She was a simple woman and hers was a good death. At the end she did not clutch or grab for her life. She had put her affairs in order and had made her peace with those she struggled with. On that last night she sat up and a small group of intimates stood in a circle around her bed, holding hands and singing hymns to God. At some point she lifted her hands while holding those of her neighbors, and, still singing, she wept. As she wept, she smiled. It was miraculous. At once everyone knew that she had somehow surrendered the burdens that we all carry, that weigh us down, that keep us from loving. Everyone saw that she knew something they did not. She was utterly free. It was the most deeply joyous occasion anyone could remember. And almost two days later, when Peter showed up in Joppa and raised her, she began a new life. Ever since that day she has carried herself with that same miraculous and utterly free aspect. She is a joy to behold. She carries no burden. Her love for the world and all its creatures is tangible. Her face shines and all of her words are words of life.

What everyone in Joppa learned from Tabitha is this: Do not be fooled by appearances. Death is not the enemy. To die is to be set free to love.

It has been 23 years since I last stood here. When I was 18 years old I was the “pastor” on “Youth Sunday.” Some of you here today may remember that (I personally hope that you have forgotten it). Lots of things have changed for me since then. I have gone to college. I have gotten married. I have gone to graduate school. I have had a large number of addresses. I have had jobs. I have had three children. I have gone to graduate school again. I have returned to Atlanta. It is good to be back, and on this Fourth Sunday of Easter I want to talk to you about death. Not physical death but spiritual death. Spiritual death is very real. To explain to you what I mean by spiritual death, I will tell you a story.

Henry, Julia, and Kristen are my children. I love them. Those of you who have children know what this means. To have a child is to cut your heart out and let it walk around on its own. And to go to school on its own. To learn and to get hurt on its own. To live its own life, not yours. The free giving of life is very painful, and this makes the love of a parent for a child different than any other love. It is a love balanced on the brink of obsession. It is very out of one’s control: fierce, consuming, desperate. It is a love mixed with the pain of letting go. Those of you who have children know what I am talking about. Those who do not, know this: Your parents love you.

Henry is my son. He is nine years old. Everyone says he looks like me. Everyone says he talks like me. Everyone says he acts like me. And that is always flattering to me, because I think he’s a beautiful boy. He is handsome, smart, engaging, dependable, a really good egg. He shares my interest in math and science and I share his interest in chess and basketball. He is my only son and I love him fanatically.

When Henry was six he taught me a painful lesson. He and I went to the city park up in Rome, GA where we lived. It was early evening, surprisingly cool and dry for August in Georgia. I was looking forward to sharing an hour or so of free play with him before classes started at the college the next day. As we walked up to the playground, we noticed some Hispanic boys playing soccer out in the field. They looked to be, on average, about 2 years older than Henry. As we drew nearer to them, Henry grew excited and asked “Dad, can I

go play with them?” I started to say *No*. I was thinking: *You’ll get hurt. They’re bigger and stronger and faster than you and you will end up being left out. They don’t even speak English. You’ll be disappointed.* But then, to my own surprise, I said “Yes, take off.” He ran toward the boys. As I watched him go, I realized that everyone had been wrong: Henry is not really like me. I could never have done such a thing when I was six. I did not have his confidence. I did not have his physical skill. And at once I knew his distance from me, his separateness, and the rather severe limits of my own self. And something opened up in me like a trapdoor to a cellar I never knew existed, a deep and empty place, an absence. It is a void that my son, no matter how smart, friendly, or gentle, no matter how much I wanted him to, could ever fill. There was a stinging inner death, and I mourned. I mourned the death of a secret hope: for Henry to be me, for him to seal my permanence on this earth. I stood and wept quietly as I watched him keep goal, and my newfound knowledge haunted me and as we played together until dusk and into the night.

That was a painful lesson, but do you know what? It gave me the gift of Henry. It freed me to see Henry for who he is, and more importantly, *it freed me to love him and not simply a projection of myself.* That night at the playground I learned the lesson of Tabitha: Do not be fooled by appearances. Death is not the enemy. To die is to be set free to love.

AT THIS POINT I would beg your patience. As a pastor friend of mine likes to say, I would like to take some of the varnish off. I would like to make an observation. I would like to make this observation as one who was born into this church, as one who was raised and nurtured and loved without question by this church, and as one who has returned after an absence of 23 years. I would like to observe that Wieuca Road Baptist Church is dying and that we all must die with it. We must not fight this death. Like Tabitha we must set our affairs in order. We must release the heavy burden of anger and resentment that has weighed us down. We must make our peace with those we struggle with. We must hold hands and sing hymns to God. We must rise together, weeping, and mourn.

Brothers and sisters, we have a lot to mourn.

We need to mourn the Wieuca that existed in 1984. Many of you remember that church. I surely do. That church was filled three times every Sunday. That church had the famous pastor, the best and most innovative programs, the most money, the highest profile. That church was the crown jewel of the Buckhead church scene. Let us mourn that church because it's gone and is never coming back.

We need to mourn our worship preferences. We need to mourn reChurch. We need to mourn traditional worship. We need to mourn them because they are gone and they are never coming back.

We need to mourn those friends and staff members who have left Wieuca and are no longer with us. They and their gifts are gone from this place and are never coming back.

Finally we need to mourn our sins. Specifically, we must mourn our anger and our fear.

Do you know what anger is? It is the last fig leaf, the final desperate measure, the last line of defense for those that are intent on hiding their guilt and shame. Many of us have held anger close and have lovingly nursed it and cared for and today it has grown to hideous proportions. This anger threatens to split our church. It is eating our church alive. It is poison and is manifested in gossip, in mistrust, in judgmentalism, in hypocrisy. And now this anger threatens to run a good man out on a rail. This will solve nothing. We must mourn our anger, friends. We must mourn it because if we find the courage to let it go – and let us pray to God that we will – it will be gone and it will never come back.

Do you know what fear is? It is the driver of everything that is counter to love. Fear keeps us apart, fear keeps us from showing weakness – and we are all terribly weak – and it keeps us from knowing one another. Fear keeps us from standing up and telling the truth in love. Fear keeps us silent. Fear keeps us from reaching out to those who we like to think are not like us: the homeless, the victims of AIDS, the victims of hate, the victims of the global slave trade. Fear keeps our options open – after all, if we don't like Wieuca, if we don't like the pastor or the music or the color of the carpet, we can just go elsewhere. And fear, like anger, is eating our church alive. It is covert. It is patient. It works in the quiet places of

our souls. But it is poison. We must mourn our fear, friends, because if we find the courage to let it go – and let us pray to God that we will – it will be gone and it will never come back.

Do we have the courage to die? Do we have the courage to let open that trap door to the vast empty places within us? Do we have the courage to confront our limits? To die together and allow God to lift us out of this pit of ourselves? And to allow Wieuca Road Baptist Church be raised to a life unimaginable? And to finally see each other for who we are: the messy and broken and beautiful Body of Christ? And reach out to a frightened and anxious world and heal it in the name of God, and in so doing heal ourselves? Do we have the courage to not clutch or grab for our lives, for the life of this beloved church? Do we have the courage to put our affairs in order, make peace with one another, and weep and mourn for those beloved days and people who are never coming back?

This is a Christian church. We have a leader and his name is Jesus. Jesus once said something very peculiar. He said, “If you want to become my followers, you must deny yourselves and take up your cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” *Follow me*, he said, and we all know where he is going. It is a dark place, a place of death. But do not be fooled by appearances. Death is not the enemy. To die is to be set free to love.

Let us learn from Henry. This church has never been ours. It has always been God’s. Let us learn from Tabitha. This church can be made new. Like her we can be set free to know the truth. We can be set free see ourselves clearly, to behold one another as the most beautiful of God’s creations. We can be set free to love one another. *Wieuca Road Baptist Church can be set free*. This is the message for us this morning. We can believe that and courageously mourn the old things. We can step back and let the old Wieuca die and allow space and time for a new Wieuca to grow and flourish. Or we can hide behind our anger and fear and cling to our own precious ideas of what true life is.

To put this succinctly: We can trust in Jesus, or not. It is our choice. May God grant

us the courage to trust and the freedom to love.

Amen.