

Easter Morning, 2011

Colossians 3:1-4

k. voskuil @trinityreformed, grand rapids

My wife Gretchen and I use the Jesse Tree during Advent to help teach and re-teach some of the core stories of faith that culminate in the birth of Jesus Christ. My oldest two are certainly excited to pull out the clay figurines and to guess at what biblical story they represent—the world talks of the creation narrative; the rainbow, the end of the flood; strands of wheat, the story of Ruth; a big fish with a person's foot hanging out; Jonah. The hardest to remember, due to some wonderfully complex names and the story itself, is that of Shadrack, Meshach, and Abendgo from the book of Daniel. Theirs is the story of being tossed into a fiery furnace because of their refusal to worship an idol during their captivity in Babylon. Thus, their commitment to God enraged King Nebuchadnessar II who, in his fury, had the flames stoked up 7 times higher than normal. Yet, the three not only lived, but even this Babylonian king is forever changed in witnessing God's faithfulness. Instead of instilling fear among his subjects, this king is now filled with righteous fear himself. Not so easy explaining that to a 7 and 4 year-old when we drill into them the devastating, potentially deadly, power of fire. This was only reinforced with those tragic deaths last week when a youth pastor and his infant son died from a house fire on the other side of the river. But why didn't they burn, my two oldest ask? Why weren't they afraid? What gave Shadrack, Meshach, and Abendgo strength to literally dance in the very jaws of death?

Hundreds of years later, an angel asked a bunch of women a different question, "Why do you look for the living among the dead. He is not here, but has risen."

During Spring Break, the twins did their first ever road trip to Hotlanta, Georgia where Gretchen gave a paper at an English conference. *Cat Billings, God bless her, joined us and lent a helping hand.* The highlight, for me, wasn't necessarily the amount of crying our minivan endured on that never-ending drive, but rather, a shorter trip, across town, that Nola, Marcie and I took later in the week. We drove to famed Ebenezer Baptist Church, the burial place, and living museum all connected to Coretta and Martin Luther King, Jr. No pun intended, but it was a dream for me to even be there—in that very locale where the gospel took on flesh and blood to painfully transform our country around the sins of racial and socio-economic injustice. On the outside the church and neighborhood and Park Service facilities look so peaceful and almost serene, but a few steps inside reveal something very different as the quintessential pictures of lynching's, and fire hoses, and police dogs ripping into protesters remind all of how much sacrifice has been involved in getting us even this far. Marcie needed to be held as she buried her head into my shoulders and Nola peppered me with lots of difficult questions. None of us could digest all that pain for too long. As I left, I wondered how Martin, himself a minister and father, could face such constant craziness and fear day in and day out. He too, had children who simply wanted to bury their heads in his arms and not worry about being shot or fire-bombed or harassed everywhere they went. He, too, simply wanted to live life to its fullest instead of being captured by death, sin and hatred. I still ask how did this father of young children did it? How did others like him literally and spiritually walk straight into roaring bonfires of death and swinging batons of persecution? Why didn't they simply do what was easier, less confrontational, less dangerous, less...deadly?

Still, the angel asks, Why do you keep looking for the living among the dead. He is not here, but has risen.

Indeed, our Luke text speaks of those women literally seeking out a decaying corpse. Their eyes, hearts, minds and souls expected death because that is what happens after we breathe our last. Death is where life ends, which of course is sad. They were deeply grieving—which is only natural. Grief has always been the faithful companion to love. In this, it would be outrageous for anyone truly close to Jesus not to have hearts broken that morning. We grieve because we love. Of course, death is painful. Of course, missing loved ones hurts. Our Trinitarian God has created us to be in relationship—to live with and for others; so when those others die some of that life and love will also die (at least, these relationships will be forever changed). Yes, grief has always been the faithful companion to love. Yet, and this is a rather big yet, death does not define us nor does it control our destiny. Easter, at its most basic and profound level, is the story of resurrection. It is the story of our Savior literally defeating the powers of hatred through his self-sacrificial love. It is the story of death losing its ultimate grasp upon us. In other words, we can certainly respect death. We can understand it—and its impact upon our lives. We can even honor it as a necessary life-cycle within creation itself. **But fearing death is different.** Fearing death gives death itself way too much power. Fearing death can skew and sour our relationship with God and others. Fearing death can even hinder, or at least stunt, our growth into deeper trust and wider faith in what God plans on accomplishing through us both on this side of everlasting and beyond.

Why do you keep looking for the living among the dead. Jesus is not here, but has risen.

This is what the Apostle Paul is also saying in our small slice of his letter to the Colossian Church. Since we have been raised with Christ, Paul writes, we are to also seek the things that are above: To not be captivated by tombs. Or controlled by sin. Or captured by those fears that keep our motivations and priorities more fixed to Good Friday than to what happened three days later. No, death does not define us. Nor does death dictate our future. Nor does death have any final word in God's lexicon of redemption. Best yet, Paul uses a wonderfully thick phrase in verse 4 that only reiterates and expands upon this truth. In relationship to us being spiritually communed (connected) with Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul talks about us joining our Savior in his future glory. *Great stuff.* But look how the apostle talks about Christ "being our life." Verse 4: "When Christ, who is your life, is revealed..." Christ, who **is our life.** I love this-- Christ being our life. Christ being the reason we live; Christ as the motivation to our life; Christ as the focus of our love for neighbor; Christ as the lens in which we view the world; Christ as one who has already swallowed the power of death; Christ as the heartbeat of mission; Christ as the reason we can respect death, but never fear it or give it too much power; Christ is our life. The same Christ who lived, loved, died and now reigns for us and our salvation. The same Christ who smashed the power of evil, not through brute force but by utter selflessness. The same Christ who demanded everything from his disciples, but who also shared all inheritance as well. Christ as our life; our future; our hope; our hunger for justice; our thirst for righteousness; our joy and very model in how to live with courage and purpose within the world's structures and systems and principalities that are still overly focused upon

the empty claims of death. Please know that Christ “being our life” isn’t an escape from this world, but rather a reorientation in how and why this world so deeply matters to God. In this, we are empowered to live and love because we can first embrace our own death as we see our humanity not as a curse or limitation, but instead, a gift from Christ who, himself, taught us how to fully and freely dance into the very jaws of death itself. We do so, especially post-resurrection knowing that death does not define us; that death cannot dictate our future; that death will never have the final word.

Why do you keep looking for the living among the dead. Jesus is not here, but has risen.

He said it a touch different, but at its heart and soul it is the same message. Martin Luther King Jr., the same minister and father of young children at the time of tumultuous personal challenge declared that, “Until you conquer the fear of death, you don’t know what freedom is.” *Martin would need to wrestle with this all the way until his assassination in Memphis.* Until you conquer the fear of death, you won’t know freedom. Until we conquer the fear of death, we won’t have freedom. I have a grandmother turning 97 this next month—she is nearing death. Gretchen’s grandfather is on the edge of entering hospice—yes, death is also near for this great lover of life. Be it cancer. Be it congestive heart disease. Be it our own children facing unknown medical futures. Be it random violence, tsunamis, house fires, or street protests. Be it threats, and challenges, and incapacitating anxieties all connected to our mortality...Until we conquer any and all fears of such death, we will never be free to really live. Until we honestly own and embrace our true humanity, we will be limited to how boldly we can really love others. Until we hand over these fears to God and trust in the power of the resurrection, we will miss the opportunity to really dance in the sheer delight of God’s faithfulness with brothers and sisters like Martin, and Coretta and Shadrack, and Meshach and Abendgo and Paul and the countless others no longer looking for Jesus in a closed tomb filled with death.

Why look for the living among the dead. Jesus is not dead, but has risen.

Jesus is not dead, but has risen. This is why we can sing the loudest Alleluia’s today. *Jesus is not dead, but has risen.* This is why we can confront our deepest fears—especially those of death itself. *Jesus is not dead, but has risen.*

Let us pray.

