

Homeward

Fourth of four sermons in the series “*At Home at Church*”

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- 1 Corinthians 15:12-20 Good News Translation ¹² Now, since our message is that Christ has been raised from death, how can some of you say that the dead will not be raised to life? ¹³ If that is true, it means that Christ was not raised; ¹⁴ and if Christ has not been raised from death, then we have nothing to preach and you have nothing to believe. ¹⁵ More than that, we are shown to be lying about God, because we said that he raised Christ from death – but if it is true that the dead are not raised to life, then he did not raise Christ. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, neither has Christ been raised. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is a delusion and you are still lost in your sins. ¹⁸ It would also mean that the believers in Christ who have died are lost. ¹⁹ If our hope in Christ is good for this life only and no more, then we deserve more pity than anyone else in all the world. ²⁰ But the truth is that Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised.
- Matthew 27:57-60 Good News Translation ⁵⁷ When it was evening, a rich man from Arimathea arrived; his name was Joseph, and he also was a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ He went into the presence of Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate gave orders for the body to be given to Joseph. ⁵⁹ So Joseph took it, wrapped it in a new linen sheet, ⁶⁰ and placed it in his own tomb, which he had just recently dug out of solid rock. Then he rolled a large stone across the entrance to the tomb and went away.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Acknowledging and preparing for our eventual and certain death reduces our fear of the unknown and gives us a spirit of joy and gratitude, acceptance and trust.

Today marks the end both of the month of September and of my church homecoming series which I've called “At Home At Church.” The series of sermons has invited us to consider various dimensions of “home”:

The first week's theme of “Homemaker” encouraged us to strive to fashion home lives that reflect the values of Jesus.

The next week's topic of “Homeless” highlighted the need to be actively engaged in helping the families and individuals who experience this all-too-common plight. But the “homeless” theme also explored how there might be times when fractured relationships can make us feel cut off and homeless even when we have a roof over our head. The good news, we recalled, is that Jesus assures us that we are always “at home” when we put our trust in him.

And last week's message about being “Homesick” recalled the Israelites whining about the good old days as they began their forty-years of wandering in the wilderness. They complained about missing the food of Egypt, but they certainly weren't missing the condition of being slaves. Their supposed “homesickness” was more a fear of what their unknown future might hold for them. We realized that Christians today may be in a similar situation, yearning for the “good old days” of the church while Jesus is pushing and pulling and urging the church to move forward to serve the society that is changing all around us.

With today's final installment in the “At Home At Church” series let's consider going “Homeward.” And before you get up and head for your cars, let me clarify that by “Homeward” I want us to consider where we're all headed. Because it shouldn't be breaking news to anyone that we will not be in this world forever. The lives we live will end. We will die. Have you acknowledged that? Have you begun to prepare for it? Because I can think of four ways that Christians should be using this life to prepare for heading “Homeward” to the Eternal Life that awaits us. Four aspects for preparing to head

“Homeward” to Jesus include making funeral plans, having a will, having a plan for your assets, and being spiritually at peace. Funeral, will, assets, spiritual peace: the map to guide you “Homeward.”

Today’s gospel story from Matthew told about Joseph of Arimathea. Although he was a respected member of the council of the Jewish Temple, Joseph of Arimathea had also come to trust in Jesus, believing in the power of Christ’s saving love. When Jesus was killed, Joseph was as aggrieved as any disciple. As a respected member of the Jewish Council, Joseph enjoyed status enabling him to approach the Roman governor Pilate and ask for the body of Jesus. Pilate figured it would do no harm, so he ordered the corpse released to Joseph of Arimathea.

The Jewish practice was to bury the deceased the same day they died if possible, and Joseph arranged for that. He had the wherewithal to afford a new linen shroud in which to wrap the body. Joseph had done some funeral planning for himself. Stonemasons had recently finished carving a new tomb into a nearby rock hill. Joseph gave his own tomb for Jesus. Now, naturally we wouldn’t expect Jesus to have made advance funeral plans, but we can see how the disciples and the mother of Jesus were spared much grief and hardship because Joseph of Arimathea handled those difficult arrangements for them.

...So I took a count this week. Nine. Nine people have let me know what their funeral plans are. We keep them in a file in the church office. (There used to be more than nine, but we’ve actually used some peoples’ plans in recent months.) I don’t want to perform your funeral, but I do want you to consider what you’d want such a service to look like. To get you started, on your way out of today’s service you can pick up a 1-page worksheet I’ve offered before. This funeral planning worksheet lists decisions to make and things to think about. You don’t need to have paid for funeral expenses in advance; you don’t even need to have made arrangements with a funeral director (although both of those arrangements might be good things to do). You can add to your funeral plan worksheet at any time. You can make changes to it. But filling it out and then giving copies to your family, perhaps a close friend, and to your church—having some of those decisions written down before you die can be such a relief to your grieving family. Even *starting* to make your own funeral plans can provide relief—as well as helpful guidance—to the people who will be responsible for honoring your memory.

After funeral plans, the second part of the map to guide you “Homeward” is a will. I certainly am not an attorney. But I know that if you don’t have a will, the court system will make choices for you. If both parents die, the courts will decide who will get custody of your minor children, regardless about how you feel about your siblings or parents or in-laws or best friends or others. Taxes may be higher for someone dying without a will. Not having the guidance of a will can lead to long, nasty and costly family squabbles. Beloved pets may not get the care you wish for them. But *having* a will gives *your* guidance to your survivors when you can no longer speak for yourself.

The importance of having a will is related to the third part of your map “Homeward,” which deals with assets. People usually use the term “estate,” but that word may sound like you have your Rolls-Royce parked by the stables behind your castle perched prominently on spacious grounds where hunting dogs roam freely. *That* sounds like an “estate,” and maybe that doesn’t sound like you.

So just think of the stuff you own—assets like bank accounts, investments and retirement plan benefits, real estate, property, treasured personal belongings like the chess set your grandfather carved for you by hand or your ring that was previously your mother’s and her mother’s and her mother’s. Having a will goes a long way toward assuring that financial resources and personal property are directed the way you want. You can leave a benefit to family members or friends. You can invest in the future by leaving a legacy to your *alma mater*, the hospital that made a difference for you, your favorite service club, animal shelter, or arts organization, and of course, by designating part of your assets as a gift to further the ministry and mission of your church.

So to prepare for our journey “Homeward,” we can start making plans for our own funeral or memorial, we can make our wishes known by having a will, and we can direct how we want to leave a legacy for people and organizations by what we choose to do with the assets we owned when we die.

Doing those specific tasks all cause us to face our mortality—to recognize that the lives we’re living will not go on forever. Let’s be frank: some people have a hard time *thinking* about death, much less

talking about it, and an even harder time taking concrete actions that address our eventual condition of having died.

- Yes, thinking about our own eventual death can remind us to treasure each day: our work and play, our families, our school, our church.
- But thinking about our death can bring back twinges of the sorrow we felt when loved ones died.
- Thinking about our own death can prompt feelings of sadness as we anticipate missing beloved persons and precious experiences.
- Thinking about our death can bring anxiety because we don't know what happens in what we call "the afterlife."

We can read books and see movies about people who claim to have touched the life beyond death through "near-death experiences," but we're still hesitant to embrace the unseen future with confident trust because no one has come back to tell us about Eternal Life clearly and convincingly.

Except one. Jesus.

He's the reason we're here. He's the reason we know the mighty, eternal, compassionate God. It is the life of Jesus we want to emulate, and it is his faith in *his* Heavenly Father and *our* Heavenly Father that we are called to take hold of and make our own. Jesus was not simply a model citizen for the world at a particular time and in a particular place. The torturous treatment by the very people he loved snuffed out the light of life that he had brought into the world.... But it *was* and it *is* the plan of the Eternal God that earthly life – with its triumphs and tragedies, its brilliant joys and devastating sorrows – even earthly life is not the final word. The apostle Paul himself first warned us, then lifted us, through his words to the Corinthian Christians:

If our hope in Christ is good for this life only and no more, then we deserve more pity than anyone else in all the world. ²⁰ But the truth is that Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised.¹

So the fourth part of the map leading us "Homeward" is welcoming a sense of spiritual peace, not worried about what we cannot see because we entrust our spirit to God through Jesus. In the resurrection of Jesus God has guaranteed that we, too, will be raised to life after death.

It's ironic that we tend to have a "death-grip" on this life, when what we need is a "life-grip" on what God holds for us when we die. Jesus invites us to become more willing to release our grasping, clutching hold on the life we know, because he has seen the indescribable joy of Eternal Life in God's intimate presence. Jesus calls us to entrust to God's care the life God holds in store for us when we are no longer bound by the limits of space and time. We're not called to reject this earthly life like the misguided, suicidal members of some cult. We can appreciate this life while also welcoming the promised gift of Eternal Life – welcoming Eternal Life with expectant faith and confident hope.

So when's the time to begin preparations for heading "Homeward"? When you get married? When you have kids? When you retire? The time is when you first hear the saving news of Jesus Christ and ask him to rule your heart and guide your life. When you accept Jesus as your Master and Savior, you're ready to start preparing to head "Homeward," putting your anxieties at bay and your trust in him. And the acts of making your funeral plans, indicating your wishes by having a will drawn up, making a plan to utilize your assets to benefit others... all these steps *help* to put your spirit in a right place.

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¹ 1 Corinthians 15:19-20 Good News Translation