

Trinity Church (ELCA)

Stephens City, Virginia

Sunday's Sermon

June 5, 2016

The Rev. Mr. Cameron P. Keyser

Pentecost 4-C

Ahh, yeah – I think *I* would have been a bit freaked out like they were at that little ‘miracle’ Jesus had just performed, too: “The dead man sat up, and began to speak...and fear seized all of them...”

Reminds me of a great story the late Lewis Grizzard: long-time humorist for the *Atlanta Constitution*, and one of the funniest story tellers who ever lived – a story he once told about “Wyman C. Wannamaker, Jr.: “a Great American and my boyhood friend and idol” who was 13, and not afraid of nuthin’....except...dead folks: ghosts and haints and boogers and “all them kinds of things...”

Well, Wyman’s great uncle: Cleve Phillips died - “warn’t much of a big thing,” Grizzard recalls, “since Cleve was about 2 years older than baseball. And he was a hunched-over man – bent almost double: got that from years of trying to hide his smoking from his parents and then his 4 wives.

Well, the funeral directors – all graduates of the Georgia School of Funeral Engineering – had a problem getting Uncle Cleve to lay flat: every time they’d lay him on his back, his legs’d pop up like this...

And when they mashed ‘em back down, he’d sit up – like this...

One of the funeral men – “a summa cum laude graduate of the Georgia School of Funeral Engineering - got out his calculus book and figured it out: went down to the hardware store and got him a rubber stretch strap with a hook on each end....hooked one end to the casket then run the strap under Cleve’s clip on tie and canvas shirt – and then sent him on back to his house where they had the southern tradition of ‘sittin up with the dead.’

If you got a ‘cool one’ layin there in your living room” – Grizzard notes - “you just don’t go on to bed and watch Jay Leno... somebody gotta’ sit *up* with that thing!

The funeral home would provide 4 foldin’ funeral home chairs - remember our time at Jones? ...and 4 of them hand-held funeral home fans: on one side it had the funeral home address: with “free delivery and pick-up...” and on the other side: a pretty picture of heaven.

Well, “Wyman C. Wannamaker, Jr.: “a Great American and my boyhood friend and idol” as Grizzard always called him, got conned into helping his daddy and

2 other guys sit up with Great Uncle Cleve that night: Uncle Cleve over there in the corner strapped down in that casket...Wyman and the others: sittin’ there in those folding funeral home chairs, with those hand held funeral home fans – all night long...

And not one of ‘em knows ‘bout that strap.

‘Long about 9:30 there come up a bad cloud: we’re talkin about lightnin’, and thunder that made the windows rattle and shake...the old oak tree in the front yard casting eerie shadows on the curtains in the living room, and Uncle Cleve strapped down in that casket.

About 10 o’clock that storm got worse. One of the guys stretched, got up out of his chair, looked at Wyman and his daddy and said, “Well, if you folks gonna’ set up, I think I’m gonna go on to bed...” and out of the room he went.

Came 11 o’clock – the storm was even worse: rain beatin’ on the windows something fierce...thunder shaking the whole house on its foundation. The other fellow got up, put on his coat and said to Wyman and his daddy: “Well, if you 2 folks are gonna’ sit up, I reckon I’ll go on home to bed, too...”

“Then, come the stroke of Midnight when the storm was in the height of its fury, Wymans daddy got up, looked at little ole “Wyman C. Wannamaker, Jr.: “a Great American and my boyhood friend and idol” and said, “Well, son, if *you’re* gonna sit up, I think I’m gonna’ go on to bed myself. And he left.

Now you still with me?: alone in that dark, dark room with Uncle Cleve Phillips who’s been strapped down in that casket by 3 graduates of the Georgia School of Funeral Engineering – and aint nobody else but my little ole friend “Wyman C. Wannamaker, Jr.: “a Great American and my boyhood friend and idol” – left.

‘Bout 2 oclock that mornin’ there come up a clap of thunder and a streak of lightn’ that ran clear thru that house: so strong and so swift that when it hit, it knocked out every light – every source of power – from Moreland, Georgia to downtown Spartanburg, South Carolina!

And, at the precise *moment* that bolt of lightning hit on that metal casket, and all the lights went out, and the storm raging outside....that strap.....

in Uncle Cleve's casket come loose – and Uncle Cleve just sorta' came riiiiiding-up out of that casket... sat up and looked around - like he had good sense.

“Wyman C. Wannamaker, Jr.: “a Great American and my boyhood friend and idol” – cast *down* his hand-held funeral home fan, rose *out* of his folding funeral home chair, rushed over to the casket and said, “Well, Uncle Cleve: if *you're* gonna' sit up I think I'm gonna' go on to bed.....”

“The dead man sat up and began to speak,” the text tells us this morning...and fear seized all of them.” I'll bet it did – just like with “Wyman C. Wannamaker, Jr.: “a Great American and my boyhood friend and idol.”

It's a pathetic picture Luke paints in today's gospel story: the dead man was the woman's only son – and she: a widow. Orphans and widows were pretty much worthless to society: they'd lost their livelihood, their status, their security, *and* their future. And now the son is dead. Couldn't get much worse.

Death has very real power – and 'forever' consequences. Money and prestige and position won't change it...visits, and phone calls, and sympathy cards can't...neither preachers nor churches nor expensive funerals.

But, *Jesus* did and *Jesus* does.

Two processions: both heading to Nain – one, coming *in*, the other going *out*; one brings the light of life; the other: the stench of death. They're on a collision course – just like they remain so today. Something has *got* to give. And our money is that it won't be death. After all, the statistics are overwhelmingly convincing: 100% of those who have been born have died - and, most have stayed dead.

When death grabs hold, there's no return, no going back - no appeal. Death is inevitable and immovable. Death always has the last word.

Sources Consulted

Ron Luchies, *A God With Heart*

Donald T. Williams, *The Widow of Nain's Son*

Adrian Dieleman, *Don't Cry*

But, not any more because *Jesus* came to have the 'last word,' too. When these two processions meet at crossroads of Nain – or, at a crossroads in your *life*: which will win?: the one headed by *Jesus*, or the one with the casket and corpse?

Of course, there are all sorts of ways to be 'dead:' I've known people who've been dead all their lives: spiritually, socially, intellectually...emotionally...They just go through the motions of living, but, on the inside, they're dead – until one day – like today - the Grace of God interrupts their lives: a phone call from your best friend on the very day – at the very moment - you need it more than anything in the world...the CAT scan you dreaded so much comes back “benign...” a coincidence in your life pops up that's so amazing it defies explanation...or, *Jesus*, today, stumbles on the funeral procession, sees the widowed mother, and has compassion: the Grace of God...interrupting.

I've presided at lots of funerals: a great privilege of offering comfort, sympathy, support, hope...but, it's always underlined by a deep sense of impotence: I can offer hope – but I can't *reverse* what's occurred. I can offer comfort - but I can't fill the yawning gap that death leaves in people's lives.

But, *Jesus* can...*Jesus* *did*...and *Jesus* *will*: just one of the inexhaustible differences between me and him. Not only did he give hope, and fill the gap that comes in death, but *Jesus* *still* does – and *will* to our dying day...and beyond.

We're a lot like Uncle Cleve, once strapped in the casket of certain death: bound by our disobedience, convicted of our self-absorption. But, the Good News of the Gospel is that *Jesus* has *already* met us the crossroads: right there at the font...

The strap has snapped, and we, too, sit up: not just for a *night*, but forever in an eternal life that's already begun – when God's Grace interrupted. Amen.