

“Of Remembrance...and Resurrection”
A Sermon Preached at Knox United Church (Parksville, B.C.)
on November 6th 2011 (21st after Pentecost/Remembrance Sunday)
by Foster Freed

1st Thessalonians 4: 13-18

It would be hard for me, nowadays...frankly not just hard but nigh to impossible for me to be neutral about the topic of remembrance. After nearly 10 years of steady, weekly participation in the Knox Grief Group...

...in other words, after nearly 10 years of participation in a weekly gathering that has, as its basic premise, the belief that remembrance is a good thing, not a bad thing...and that grief (which is often a by-product of remembrance) can be a healthy rather than an unhealthy thing...after 10 years of participation in the life of such a group, it is indeed impossible for me to be neutral where the topic of remembrance is concerned.

And this, despite the fact that remembrance—especially when it involves the remembrance of things that can, indeed, cause grief—this despite the fact that remembrance remains an increasingly counter-cultural activity: in the midst of a post-modern culture that appears to much prefer laughter and forgetting, to remembrance and the aching hearts that remembrance so often leaves in its wake. Trust me: our own grief group notwithstanding—the widespread network of hospice societies notwithstanding—I am still on the receiving end of those who complain that their family and friends (often within months of the death of a loved one) are baffled that grief has not entirely dissipated. “What? It’s been three months...and you haven’t moved on yet?” I would love to say that such statements are no longer spoken and no longer endured by those on their receiving end...but such is not the case.

And consider, if you will: consider the mathematics behind such a question. You met the person who was going to be your spouse in high-school; you married them in your early 20s, losing them to Alzheimer’s some 58 years later. That means you’ve spent over 75% of your life in partnership with that person and 100% of your adult life in their company. Not hard then to imagine...not hard then to imagine why irritation—and bewilderment—is the inevitable response when asked—by some presumably well-meaning acquaintance—wishing to know why you’re not yet over it some four months after you’ve lost that life-time companion. But since such questions continue to be asked...and such irritation continues to be experienced...the need for continued advocacy...

...advocacy on behalf of those who mourn...advocacy on behalf of those who choose to remember and weep rather than laugh and forget...the need for continued advocacy is more than a little apparent.

Then again....then again....!

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Might it not be the case that the Gospel...the Gospel of the risen Christ...is part of the problem? Nor need we, in answer to that question, look beyond this morning's scripture text: a text which may well be part of the very earliest document preserved for us within the pages of the New Testament. Reaching out to a Church he had planted in the Macedonian city of Thessalonica, the Apostle Paul—beyond a general offer of ongoing encouragement—seems especially concerned to provide assurance to these disciples regarding the resurrection: including the fact that they need not fear that their deceased loved ones (those who have died in the interim between the founding of the Church and the writing of the letter) they need not worry that these loved ones are eternally lost. On the contrary: Paul assures them that these faithful departed are not lost, and presses upon them the further assurance that they need not grieve, an assurance which, I fear, may sound a wee bit like the sort of encouragement to which too many of us have been on the receiving end. “Chin up old man! No need to fuss! No need to bother yourself! No need for grief!”

Important to note, therefore--out of fairness to Paul and also out of fairness to ourselves—important to note that Paul doesn't quite write to the Thessalonians “so that they may not grieve.” Full disclosure means acknowledging that he tells them that they are not to grieve “as other do who have no hope.” There's wiggle room, you see, in that expanded statement: wiggle room suggestive of the possibility that Paul is saying that while some manifestation of grief is inevitable in the face of life's losses...

...for heaven's sake, even Jesus was known to have wept!...

...surely what Paul is saying here is that those who know Christ and his resurrection ought not to weep as those who are lacking in hope: the key to such hope laying in the resurrection. The Gospel...the Gospel according to Paul...is one that grounds hopefulness not only in the already experienced resurrection of Christ...but in the promised return of Christ at the end of time. As we often say on Communion Sundays as part of our Great Thanksgiving: *Christ has died...Christ is risen...Christ will come again!* Or as Paul insists in this letter to the Thessalonians, making use of imagery that some of us, frankly, may find a wee bit overwrought: *For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.*

And surely...surely were we able fully to place our faith in such a prospect, surely that would change our way of grieving...our way of remembrance, our way of remembering those now gone from our midst. But what would it take for us to accept such a prospect at face value? Indeed: is it not the case that here, especially, the need to demythologize Paul's language is screamingly obvious? I'm reminded of Mark Twain's famous quote about the schoolboy, who defined faith *as believing what you know ain't so*. I am also reminded of the famous assertion by New Testament scholar—

and loyal Christian— Rudolf Bultmann when he insisted that *we cannot use electric lights and radios and, in the event of illness, avail ourselves of modern medical and clinical means and at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder world of the New Testament*. Is that not especially the case this morning, with Paul's extravagant depiction of a resurrection scenario overflowing with divine trumpets and flying archangels, opened tombs and free-floating faithful? How are we even to begin to credit such a prospect...let alone make a connection between its wild imagery and the stark actuality that opens up when we find ourselves face to face with the death of our loved ones and the far from temporary void such deaths inevitably leave in their wake.

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Some of you will have likely read...others of you may have heard second hand...the beautifully crafted eulogy that was featured in last Sunday's New York Times. Not surprising that it was beautifully crafted, because it was written by a novelist and Professor of English at a distinguished American University. Nor was it surprising that the New York Times saw fit to publish this particular eulogy, since it was written by Mona Simpson, a woman who was introduced—at the age of 25—to her half-brother, a young computer geek by the name of Steve Jobs. The whole of her remarks are worth a read; I expect that a more thoughtful eulogy has never been written. The final paragraph of that eulogy, however, is of a certain relevance today.

A couple of hours before his passing, Jobs spoke his final words. Those words, according to his sister, were monosyllables, repeated three times. She writes: *Before embarking, he'd looked at his sister Patty, then for a long time at his children, then at his life partner Laurene, and then over their shoulders past them. Steve's final words were: "Oh Wow! Oh Wow! Oh Wow!"*

And I'll confess that I share that story with a fair degree of hesitation...and no small measure of fear and trembling. After all: Jobs was most definitely not a Christian; he rejected the Church in his early teen years and appears never to have looked back. And, because he was not only a man of science but also a pretty hard-nosed businessman, his sister's account of his dying words is going to be dissected in every conceivable direction, including dissection at the hands of those who will be eager to debunk the obvious meaning of the story (which, as near-death stories go, is actually pretty commonplace): to debunk the apparent meaning of the story by identifying the particular brain chemicals that produce such visions in the minds of so many dying persons. Indeed: even were it possible to prove...

...and how, pray tell, might such a thing be proven?...

...that Jobs' experience and countless similar near-death experiences cannot be explained away on the basis of brain-chemistry...

...the fact remains that such experiences can be used to prove just about anything! Choose your poison: resurrection, eternal recurrence,

reincarnation, Rastafarianism: you name just about any other-worldly belief system, and the raw data from near-death experiences can be massaged into a vague correspondence. And as we all know, any experience that can be used to prove anything ultimately succeeds in proving absolutely nothing. That's why Christian theologians—and the Church itself, by and large—have been reluctant to make any use of the explosion of near-death stories that advances in modern medicine have yielded to us over the past 50 years. And while I personally agree that a certain measure of wariness—a certain measure of caution is always a good thing whenever we confront a near-death account...or any other mystical testimony, for that matter...

...such stories, such testimonies—or so I believe—serve as a reminder...

...serve as a gentle reminder that it may be more possible for us thoroughly modern Milles, electric light-bulbs and FM radios notwithstanding, to retain—if not a New Testament worldview per se—at least a healthy capacity for wonder...a healthy capacity to recall, with Shakespeare's Hamlet, that there are indeed more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in Horatio's philosophy, Mark Twain's philosophy, or just about any other philosophy worth its philosophical salt! All of which should serve as a call to humility: the sort of humility that can perhaps permit us to hear Paul's language in his letter to the Thessalonians...

...language filled with trumpets and angels and human beings restored to fullness of life...

...the sort of humility that can permit us to hear such language not as lunacy, but as Paul's heartfelt attempt to describe—utilizing the frail medium of human language—Paul's attempt to describe, to do justice, to the richness of mystical vision with which Paul, in the fullness of God's tender mercies, had been graced. Furthermore...furthermore...to the extent that we can hear such language generously...rather than smugly....we may find ourselves at least wondering...at least wondering what it may, in fact mean, for us to grieve...but not as those...*not* as those...who grieve without hope.

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That's the punch-line, isn't it? The hope connection: better still, the connection between our identity as an Easter people—a resurrection people—and our ability to live hopeful lives, hope-filled lives. And it seems to me that the great mistake we make is to imagine that our tears would be the key component of grief that would need to be banished were we fully to embrace the resurrection hope that Paul is so intent at incorporating into our lives. How could there not be tears...how could there not be tears at the remembrance of those whose departure we mourn, whose loss we grieve? If grieving as a Christian...if grieving as a believer in Christ's resurrection...means repressing the free-flow of tears, then frankly I want no part of such grief. I'll grieve and

yes, I'll remember in my own way, thanks very much. And tears will most definitely be a part of it! And yet...and yet!

Yesterday afternoon, as I was putting final touches on these remarks...yesterday afternoon I caught myself recalling something I often feel moved to say, often (though not exclusively) during meetings of our Knox grief group. Some of you will have heard me say at some point in the past that participation in the grief group—if it has taught me anything—participation in the grief group has taught me that everyone who loses a loved one will eventually experience (without exception) something to be angry about, and something to feel guilty about.

And let me be clear that such guilt and such anger should no more be repressed than should the tears that naturally flow when death comes a-calling. That having been said, however...that having been said: let's be clear that anger and guilt have one important thing in common. Both anger and guilt are relational in nature; anger arises in the aftermath of harm done to me, guilt in the aftermath of harm I have done to someone else: meaning that anger and guilt will both grow in direct proportion to the sense that a given relationship is irretrievably lost. In other words, anger and guilt will grow when I live with the belief—in my judgment the *false* belief—that there is no longer the possibility of putting things right. No longer the possibility of making amends, learning from mistakes, offering and receiving forgiveness for harms suffered and opportunities overlooked.

And the irony...from where I stand is that it is hope alone—Easter hope...resurrection hope...it is hope alone that can make remembrance (true remembrance) possible. If death really and truly is the end...if the passing of a loved one means that there will be, for all eternity, no opportunity to put things right, no opportunity to restore and recover and renew the rich tapestries of our lives...then quite frankly we are better off with laughter and forgetting than with remembrance and tears. But where there is hope...where there are new possibilities a-borning, including the impossible possibility that is ours to claim as an Easter people...as a resurrection Sunday people, as a people who have learned that even the ugliest of endings can be prelude to a new beginning...

...as such a people remembrance can be ours...remembrance as a way of honouring what has been....and yes, strangely and wonderfully:

...remembrance as a way of claiming that which is still to come...that which is yet to be. In and through the One who is rightly named Alpha and Omega....not only our beginning but our end...our life, our sweetness and our hope!

May it be so! In Jesus' name! Amen!!

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