

Everyone Dies

When I was growing up in North Carolina, one of Raleigh's big attractions was a downtown museum named Exploris and its huge IMAX theater. For context, this was before every major theater in America boasted "IMAX screens," which in my humble opinion are a pale imitation of the real thing. Exploris was the real deal: a huge theater with a massive concave screen and speakers that shook the teeth in your mouth during the big theater demonstration they ran before every movie.

This was the early 2000s so it was before blockbuster movies were shown in IMAX. The only movies they made for IMAX back then were educational films and nature documentaries, the kind showing off close-up shots of ants or helicopter aerials of California's redwood forests. In those days going to IMAX was a big deal, a treat diluted somewhat by the threat that we'd have to actually learn something.

And learn something I did.

One of the films we saw in IMAX was a documentary about the pyramids in Egypt. I was probably about nine years old so I don't remember all the details, but something about the movie's description of ancient Egyptian burial practices—how great kings were embalmed and mummified in preparation for their journeys after death—unsettled me. The movie's framing narrative featured a modern Egyptian girl asking her archeologist grandfather questions about the pyramids. In one scene—I remember this much—she sits on an ancient block of stone jutting out from the corner of a great pyramid. The sight of a girl my own age sitting in the shadow of this monument to death made me realize why this movie was making me so uncomfortable.

"Oh," nine-year-old me thought. "That's me. I'm going to die someday."

I am going to die someday.

It was so startling, this moment of self-discovery, that I remember it to this day. It's always dangerous to universalize our experiences but I think there must be that moment in every person's life—whether remembered or not—where we grapple with this simple truth and its implications for us and our loved ones. Everyone dies. It's such a simple truth, as if to say that the sky is blue and the grass is green, yet it's the truth we deny above all others. Everyone dies—except me. Except the people I love. Death happens to other people. Not me.

Yes you. Yes me. Everyone dies.

Human beings have struggled with the reality of death for thousands of years. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the great king Gilgamesh watches his best friend die and realizes that someday

this will happen to him. This realization sends him on an arduous and futile quest for immortality. Eventually Gilgamesh gives up and accepts that someday he, too, must die. In the Iliad the death of his beloved Patroklos sends the warrior Achilles into a destructive spiral of grief and rage, unable to accept that death is something he must deal with like everyone else. In the more modern myths of Star Wars and the Harry Potter series, characters like Anakin Skywalker and Tom Riddle desperately and fruitlessly struggle to stave off the inexorable power of death even at the cost of their own souls.

It's a tale as old as time. Everyone dies. Halloween is just around the corner and every other lawn in suburban America is festooned with plastic skeletons. But do we really think about the significance of the skulls and the bones? Or are they just cheap decorations to be dutifully rolled out and then packed up year after year? We are at once obsessed and surrounded by death—from the graveyards we drive past to grim headlines announcing death tolls and freak accidents—and yet conditioned to hold death at arm's length. In modern America we insulate ourselves from the reality of death and dying, seeking new ways to prolong our lives and ignore the truth of our own mortality.

Memento mori, went the Latin phrase repeated in the Medieval Church. Remember to die.

Alright, preacher, some of you are thinking. Congratulations, you've bummed us out. We're all born to die. So what? What's it matter? What's to be done?

What is to be done?

Today we gather to celebrate the Feast of All Souls. We remember the souls of all the faithful departed, celebrating their lives and acknowledging the lived reality that we, too, will someday join them. And in acknowledging the fact of our deaths, we open ourselves to the joy of our salvation through Jesus Christ.

Joy. Yes, joy. Death holds such grim sway over our imaginations because it is the most visible sign of our brokenness and the fallen nature of the world we live in. St. Paul writes in Romans that "Sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned." (Romans 5:12) Death and sin are bound up together. We fear them both so much because we cannot escape them.

At least, not through our own power. But you can rejoice—rejoice, safe and comforted by the knowledge that you are already dead!

Yes, you are already dead. You died a long time ago, drowned in the saving waters of Baptism and raised to new life in Christ's resurrection. "Don't you know that those of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Trust me, the words of our scriptures actually mean something.) And to be baptized into Christ's death means being baptized into the Resurrection, the triumph of our God of Life over the power of death.

The Good News of our Christian faith is a call to life. We walk joyfully even in death's dark valley because the God of Life walks with us. Through the Body of Christ we are liberated from the forces of death and brought into the kingdom of life.

Our scripture and our prayers proclaim this Good News. We hear this Good News every Sunday. So why do we Christians struggle so hard with living into that Good News?

Perhaps it's because death seems to be winning. The forces of death are all around us. Our past, present, and future—history, the news, our very bodies—are stamped with the outward signs of death. But as our reading from Wisdom tells us, "The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality."

The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God. Remember this when we read the Necrology and remember those who have departed. Yes, they have gone from us. They have died, the way of all flesh, and gone ahead. But their hope is full of immortality, the saving hope of the God of Life whose radiance shines like sparks through the stubble. A God of Life who makes all things new and frees Creation from the power of death.

Jesus says it plainly in today's Gospel: "The hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For just as the Father has

life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.” God is life, and all life is in God. Through faith and Baptism we are called out of death and into eternal life

Easy enough for me to say from the pulpit. Harder, so much harder, when we face the reality of death in our flesh and in our loved ones. So often the forces of death seem to be winning. What are words like “eternal life” worth next to the loss of a loved one or the tragedies playing out across the world and in our own neighborhoods?

But this brings us back to what needs to be done. As Christians we are not passive recipients of God’s saving grace but active agents of life in a world dominated by death.

Memento mori—remember to die—is not a grim reminder of our mortality. It is a call to action. Because the knowledge that we, too, will die changes the calculus of life. The ways of God—the ways of Jesus and the Holy Spirit—are ways of life. Live the way of life, the way of Jesus set before us in scripture and the Good News of the Gospels.

Live life in the knowledge that you carry the spark of God’s salvation. Show that salvation to the world, so that all will know that there is hope beyond the power of death. Everyone dies. But through Christ we are freed from the power of that death and stand here together, united in the hope of the resurrection.