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What in You Is Longing for New Life?

John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

For many years, one of my favorite books has been *Hope for the Flowers* by Trina Paulus. It's a sweet story about two caterpillars - Stripe and Yellow - as they respond to a deep urge to get higher, to reach the sky. They are on a quest together to figure out how, but it isn't until they face defeat and get separated that Yellow learns about butterflies - and that's what caterpillars are meant to become. She asks an elder getting ready to spin a cocoon, "How does one become a butterfly?"

He replies, "You must want to fly so much that you are willing to give up being a caterpillar."

"You mean to die?" asked Yellow.

"Yes and no," he answered. "What looks like you will die but what's really you will still live. Life is changed, not taken away. Isn't that different from those who die without ever becoming butterflies?"

In some way, the Greeks who came to see Jesus had the same urge, knowing there was something more to life than what they could see, more than what they knew. After much time and energy seeking after *something*, they have come to know that Jesus was what they were seeking - not the law, not the temple, not the priests or the sacrificial system, but Jesus - Jesus who just a couple chapters earlier said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Jesus who raised Lazarus just a chapter before saying, "I am the resurrection and the life." Jesus who would soon proclaim, "I am the way, the truth and the life."

Seeking something more to life, they turned to Jesus.

And when they came to him, I imagine that Jesus gave them more than they had bargained for. Jesus said to them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

They came to see Jesus, seeking something more to life - and Jesus spoke about death. Jesus said it was time for him to be glorified - and then he speaks about dying.

We come because we too wish to see Jesus. But when I hear Jesus speak like this, I want to interpret it in light of Jesus himself, not about me - never about me and what I love.

Because, you know, we already know how his story ends. We know that Jesus will soon be arrested, beaten, mocked and finally crucified to satisfy the angry crowd, the corrupt system and the oppressive rulers. But we know that is not the end, that his glory comes from his death - that three days later, Jesus will be resurrected. That when death comes, his body is laid into the ground like a single grain of wheat and it will bear much fruit. He will come forth in a resurrection that means new life for all people, declaring that in the end, love and life win.

And we rejoice! We can't wait for that time in a few weeks when we will gather together again and proclaim that Christ is Risen indeed! We love the resurrection, celebrate the resurrection...of Jesus.

But when it comes to myself, I am not so sure. When it comes to myself, it becomes a lot harder to trust in the resurrection.

A little more than a year ago, I visited several sites commemorating the Ugandan martyrs. In the 1880s at least 55 young men in Uganda were condemned to death by the Kabaka of Buganda because they put their loyalty to Christ above their loyalty to the Kabaka. In many places around the sites, there was a saying based on a writing by Tertullian in the second century. It said, "The blood of the Uganda martyrs is the seed of our faith."

Visiting the Basilica of the Uganda Martyrs in Namugongo, I walked between the shrines, reading the story and contemplating the statues depicting each one of the 22 Catholic martyrs. Their deaths had the opposite effect that the Kabaka desired - more people were inspired in their faith, more people wanted to know about this God that they were willing to serve unto death. For the Ugandan martyrs, as their bodies were laid into the ground like a single grain, much fruit came forth. Their blood truly became the seed of faith.

I am glad that I am not called to serve in that way, that my life has not been threatened as a result of following Christ, and yet we too are called to die so that we may also bear fruit. We are told to hate our lives - to esteem our lives less - so that we may have eternal life. This goes counter to how the world thinks.

And yet, a life of faith is not about being a good person or a nice person - but about death. A life of faith is marked by a daily dying to self so that we can be raised to new life with Christ.

This death clears the way for the new covenant -

When God's laws will be written on our hearts and not our own laws.

When the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will be our god, not the myriad other things we chase after and elevate.

As people whose faith is based on the resurrection, we spend a lot of time denying death.

We deny the death of our preferences, even when they do not serve us any longer.

We deny the death of our need to have it all together, even when it brings anxiety and depression.

We deny the death of the way things were, even when the way things were no longer works.

We deny the death of our need to be right, even when it denies others the right to live.

We deny death and run from it, perhaps because it is much, much harder to imagine the truth of resurrection and to trust in it...not just for Jesus, but for our own lives.

We deny death because *this* is the only life we know. And yet, it is in death that the Spirit goes to work, breathing new life.

So every day, we are invited into this cycle of death and new life again. In the Small Catechism, Luther writes, "Baptism signifies that the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance, and

on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”

Every day, we are invited to die to ourselves in order to make way for something new and beautiful that only God can do. We die to ourselves so that we may bear fruit for the kingdom of God.

As we slowly inch toward Good Friday and the Passion, when we again tell the story of Jesus’ death, I ask you - what in your life needs to die? What in you is longing for new life? Because only if this grain falls into the ground and dies, will it bear much fruit - otherwise it remains alone, isolated and unproductive - far from the abundant life Christ brings.

Just as a caterpillar was meant to fly as a butterfly, you are meant for a Resurrection life with Christ. Through Christ, what seems like the end is really just the beginning. Amen.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Hebrews 5:5-10

John 12:20-33