



Guildwood Community Presbyterian Church

140 Guildwood Parkway, Scarborough, Ontario
M1E 1P4

Worship for Guildwood Community Presbyterian Church, March 29, 2020

Dear Friends,

One of the activities central to the life of any church is gathering for worship, and yet again, we are unable to do that physically. Here is an attempt to recover something of our normal connection by rendering our service in print and distributing it through the internet. May it be a blessing to you, and in a small way bring us together despite the distance. Grace and peace to you.

Rev. Bob Smith

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Eternal God, you gave us life in the beginning, when your word brought the creation into being. You gave us new life in your Son, Jesus, who renews us and sets us free through the forgiveness of our sins. And you give us life daily through your Spirit, who breathes your power into us, and inspires us for the way ahead. As we move through this Lenten season, and as we move through the struggles of our days, renew us and fill us with your love and hope. All praise be to you, O God.

God of love, breathe fresh life on us this day. Forgive us we pray for the sins that rob us of the life you would give us, that take it away from others and cause chaos rather than peace. Forgive our doubts and fears, the times when we cut you off and lose our hope. Forgive our thinking that we are on our own, forgetting your promise to be present to us, and your gift of the community of faith around us. Save us from ourselves, for we are often our own worst enemy. Lift us up with your Spirit of life. Open us up to new life, give us courage to believe in you, and boldness in living your will for us. We ask this in Jesus' name, and join together now to offer the prayer he taught us:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those
who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon and the Peace

Friends in Christ, hope in God, for in God you will find steadfast love and abundant life. Through the Spirit God is at work to renew the world and to bring forgiveness and hope. Thanks be to God.

The Peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Scripture

[John 11:1-44](#) ← this links to on-line text of the NRSV bible
[Click here](#) for additional scripture readings from today's lectionary. Links courtesy of the [Revised Common Lectionary](#), a project of the [Vanderbilt Divinity Library](#).

Sermon

Some years ago I read an opinion piece
that said you can learn a lot about a culture
by looking at its biggest buildings.
It used to be churches,
and not just the biggest cathedrals
but the spires of even small worship spaces
were what defined the skylines of our cities.
The church framed our private and public life.

This writer was lamenting
that it was now bank towers,
and sports stadiums,
and malls.
They were the most striking, the most overbuilt,
the most important buildings to us.
What does that say about our values?
Faith yields to commerce and entertainment.
But I think that might have changed,
and not just because of our current pandemic crisis —
Now it's hospitals.
Maybe not the very biggest,
but I'd guess the biggest buildings built at public expense.
And medical teaching institutes at our universities.
Backed up by research facilities and labs
and funded by universal health care.

Don't get me wrong — I'm sure glad they're there —
especially right now —
but they do say something
about our values.

They are dedicated not only to health care —
they are a hedge against our greatest fear,
which is death.

We wouldn't be stupid enough to bet against death —
we all know it will win out in the end.
But we sure fear it,
and do all that we can to stay in the game as long as we can
before it gets to cash in on us.

We may make wonderful advances in medical care,
but it will not solve the death problem.
We will spend billions on health care,
and it will improve and extend the lives of many,
but death will still sit there, waiting for us.
I read a while ago that the Ford Motor Company spends more
on its employee health plan
than it does on steel.
And they say that for us in Canada,
one the things about life here that we value most
is our universal health care — probably now more than ever.

Once again, it's a great thing
and bless you, those who make that your life's work.
But it is all a hedge against the inevitable —
the fact that none of us is going to survive this life.
And knowing that is a sobering thought —
death sure knows how to push our buttons.

In our reading today, Lazarus is ill, over in Bethany.
We haven't met him before,
but we know his sisters — you remember —
Mary, who sat at Jesus' feet while he taught
and taking in his every word.
and Martha who was busy making dinner in the kitchen
and got a little ticked at Mary for not helping.

They are Jesus' friends.
He has stayed in their home.

And these friends send him a message,
 "The one whom you love is ill."
Not 'Lazarus', but 'the one whom you love.'

And what does Jesus do?

Nothing.

He brushes it off -

"This illness isn't fatal,"
 which is interesting,
 since he doesn't even know what the illness is.

And then he waits two days before deciding to go to Bethany.

I can't explain that.

He is summoned to the sickbed of a dear friend —
 you'd think he'd grab his coat and car keys
 and be out the door in no time.

It's not like he's really busy —
 John tells us he just...
 stayed where he was.

Then when he finally decides to go to Bethany,
 which is right next to Jerusalem,
 his disciples warn him,
 "You don't want to go there, Jesus.
 Your enemies are out there,
 just waiting to kill you."

Jesus just ignores them.

And as they start out,

 Thomas pipes up, like Eeyore in Winnie the Pooh,
 being as gloomy as he can,
 "Well, let's all go then,
 so we can die together."

Death is everywhere.

Lazarus is dying,

 the disciples are resigned to their dying.

But Jesus walks on,

 somehow oblivious to it all,
 not troubled by all the death talk,
 somehow free of it all.

When they finally get to Bethany,
it's too late.
Lazarus has been in his tomb four days,
wrapped tight in a shroud.
Martha comes out to meet Jesus,
and there is faith in her greeting,
but my guess is that she's hopping mad.
*"Lord, if you had cared enough not to sit around
before deciding to come,
my brother would not have died."*

How else do we deal with death
but to look for something we could have done differently,
something he could have done,
someone to blame?

What other defense do we have against it?
if only you had been here sooner,
if only he had taken better care of himself,
if only they had diagnosed the cancer earlier,
if only I hadn't yelled at him so much,
he would still be with us.

Death knows how to push our buttons.

Jesus says,
"Your brother will rise again."
Martha knows the standard line of her faith,
"Yeah, yeah, I know all that stuff," she says,
*"about the resurrection of the dead on the last day —
someday —
but what good is that going to do for me now?"*

She doesn't want that pious talk
that says things like
"Oh, he's gone to a better place."
Or, *"It must have been God's will."*
She wants her brother back.

But Jesus isn't talking abstract theology
or vague promises.

He doesn't say,
"Someday, Lazarus will rise again."
or, *"You'll see him again up in heaven."*

He says,
 *"I am the resurrection.
 I am the life."*
Not, *"Let's discuss the idea of resurrection."*
 *"I am resurrection.
 I am life."*
And he pushes her,
 "Do you believe this?"

And stuck-in-the-kitchen Martha,
 practical, no-nonsense,
 clean-up-after-everyone-else Martha
comes up with probably the most expansive and articulate
 statement of faith
 in this Gospel of John up to this point.
 *"Yes, I believe.
 I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God.
 the one coming into the world."*
Finally, at least these two, Jesus and Martha
 are talking about something other than death.

They head out to the cemetery,
 with Jesus finally seeming to take charge.
And John tells us that Jesus was deeply moved,
 and wept at the grave of his friend.
Weeping for what exactly, we are not told —
 maybe tears at his own loss of a friend,
 tears for the depth of Mary and Martha's grief,
 tears for the frailty of life and how quickly and randomly
 it can be taken away,
 tears that no one seems to understand what he is about,
 tears at the enormity of what he has been given to do
 and how alone he is,
 how short his own time is,
 tears at the power death seems to hold over them all
 and how it can push their buttons.

Then Jesus stands before the tomb
 and John tells us that it is with a loud voice
 that he says — that he shouts —
 "Lazarus, come out!"

How else would you wake the dead
but with a loud voice,
a voice of defiance
a voice rising from the same place of his pain
that his tears had welled up?
"Lazarus, come out!"

John leaves us to imagine the exact details of that moment
but Lazarus comes out.
still bound in the wrappings of death.

*"Unbind him and let him go," says Jesus.
"Let him be freed of any hint of death.
Let him live again."*

So Lazarus lives,
but it is the last we hear of him.
No interviews about what the experience was like,
no opportunities to compare life there with life here,
no exalted place in the church
for this man at the centre of this stunning event,
no inspired sermons or motivational talks.

All we know is that he is alive.
For John, the point has been made.
Death can push our buttons,
hold us in its grip
give us the impression
that one day it will have the last word.

But Jesus says,
*"Not so fast.
Remember —
I am life,
I am resurrection.
In me, you don't need to be afraid any more.
The last word is life."*

In a couple of weeks,
the power establishment in Jerusalem,
the fickle crowd,
the guardians of the status quo,
they all finally catch up with Jesus,
and have their way with him.

He too goes to his tomb.

The Lazarus event is a signpost —
the preview of what would come next —
a glimpse of Easter,
the opening skirmish
in the showdown between life and death.

Some say that Lazarus was the last straw for Jesus' enemies,
that someone with such power,
who could hold out to people the hope
that they no longer need to be afraid, even of death —
that such a man had to be removed for good.

Sometimes it looks like the whole world is a graveyard,
that life is little more than an inexorable march toward death.
a pandemic holds the whole world hostage
and turns our lives upside down
violent atrocities continue,
wars still take their casualties,
a loved one dies.

Do we just accept that,
or do we hang on instead to the one who said,
*"I am life.
I am resurrection
and those who believe in me
do not ultimately die.
Life in me is stronger than death"*?

Maybe he said that in a loud voice as well.
*"Death does not have the last word.
In me, life has the last word,
and you can bet your life on that."*

Live fully,
in defiance of the hold that death has on us all.
Live in hope,
in spite of the losses you have suffered.
Live in joy,
that even in the world's brokenness,
Jesus calls you to life in all its abundance.

Amen.

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Hope

Gracious God, we thank you for the gift of life that you have given to us:

- in our birth,
- through the waters of our baptism,
- in your call to walk in the steps of Jesus and live as your people in the world,
- and in the life of the community of your faithful people in which you place us.

We praise you for life in all its abundance which is your gift to us.

We remember now in prayer those in our world who need a blessing from you and the hope that you can bring. In the turmoil of these days, we pray for all of us, indeed for the entire world, as we face the dangers of a global pandemic:

- for all of us as we need to maintain distance from one another, while we so need to be connected and to know the support of neighbours, family and friends;
- for churches like our own, who so desperately need our community of faith, but need to find new ways to pray, to worship, to support, and to give one another your peace;
- for those who are living in fear and uncertainty, and for those who have lost their jobs, that you would draw close to them, bring your peace, and provide their need;
- for those who have been infected with the Coronavirus, and for those who are hospitalized, that you would bring your healing and that they would be supported.
- and for those where death has invaded their lives, that you would hold them close and lift them with the knowledge that death does not have the last word, nor has any power to separate us from the love that you have shown to us in Christ.

God of life, as we struggle with the loneliness, the fear and the losses, we remember the courage and dedication of those who continue to work, sometimes at great risk, to serve us, to provide for our needs, and to keep us safe. So we lift up our thanks:

- for health care professionals, who are working so tirelessly and facing such risks, and to whom we look for direction and hope;
- for political leaders at every level, who are working together and making difficult decisions on our behalf to help keep us safe;
- for those in our grocery stores, who make sure we have food to eat;
- those who drive our busses and keep our transit moving so that we can get around;
- for cleaners, who work harder now than ever to keep our public spaces clean and safe;

- for parents who are balancing child-care, working at home, and working so hard just to keep it all together for their families;
- for first responders, on whose presence we can always depend;
- for the staff, elders, Care Team and others who are trying to keep our church family connected in these times of separation.
- and for all who take the time to care, to smile and say hello, and to reach out with actions of caring and hope.

Creator God, we wait for you and in your word we hope. For with you is steadfast love and great power to redeem. Help us to trust you and to share your resurrection life with all people and the whole creation. So may all be raised
 from despair to hope,
 from darkness to light,
 from death to life;
 through Jesus Christ, who is the resurrection and the life. Amen.

Commissioning and Benediction

Now may the God of hope
 fill you with all joy and peace in believing
 so that you may abound in hope
 by the power of the Holy Spirit
 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ
 the love of God
 and the communion of the Holy Spirit
 be with you all, now and forever.
 Amen.

This and other worship service documents are available on-line at the [GCPC website](#).