

Sermon for Sunday, November 17, 1975 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
The Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"DEATH--DOORWAY OR DEAD-END?"

St. John 14:1-14

Text: "And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also." St. John 14:3

Some of the best known places in the world today are burial monuments. In Egypt we are treated to the splendid sight of the pyramids which are simply the burial places of the great pharaohs. In India the Taj Mahal is probably the most dazzling of all the tombs in the world. In Medina the Mohammedians guard the tomb of their prophet, Mohammed. In Moscow's Red Square lies the tomb of Lenin whose body, we are told, is preserved by a mysterious process. When I was a young sailor stationed in New York City, on Sunday afternoons I used to walk to Grant's tomb on the Hudson River. It is a beautiful building of marble and stone. Several years ago our family visited Arlington National Cemetery and there saw the elaborate tomb of John F. Kennedy and watched the so-called "eternal light" flickering in the evening breeze as the guards that stand constant watch changed. If I ask you to think about it, each of us can picture in our mind's eye some special grave where the body of a loved one lies.

But the question I want to ask you is this: Where is the tomb of Jesus? In the Holy Land they will show you a place that is claimed to be the place where he once lay. Yet, the fact is historians cannot pinpoint with any certainty exactly where Jesus was buried. Does it not strike you as exceedingly strange that any movement as great and as old as Christianity would have no final resting place for the man who created the movement and who is the focus of its faith? Does it not strike you as exceedingly strange that there are great cathedrals all over the world that cost millions of dollars, yet there is no costly monument to the movements originator?

The point I would make is simply this: the tomb of Jesus was not important. Had it been, I assure you that those early followers would never have let its exact location be lost. And the reason the tomb of Jesus was not important was because he wasn't in it. The pyramid was important to the Egyptian because the body of his pharaoh was in it. The Taj Mahal was important because it held the body of a loved one. The grave guarded so faithfully at Medina is important to some because it holds the body of the prophet Mohammad. But the place where Jesus lay for three days was not important because it was empty.

Today historians accept as fact past occurrences for which they can produce only shreds of evidence. Yet, there are some who refuse to believe that the tomb of Jesus was empty. As a matter of fact, there is more justification for believing in the empty tomb of Jesus than there is for believing most historical records. It was attested to by hundreds of New Testament witnesses who saw him, talked with him, and then spread across the civilized world to proclaim him Lord and Saviour. As one historian has said, if the statements of those who testified to the empty tomb are not accepted as conclusive evidence, then no testimony and no evidence whatever can establish any truth in any age. As St. Paul himself once put it, if Jesus isn't alive from the grave then we Christians of all men are most to be pitied.

This brings us down to a very basic question: what or whom will we believe? Will we believe the naturalist who believes that death is a dead-end? Will we believe the atheist who says that death is the finish? Will we believe some philosopher who says that our immortality continues in the children we leave behind or the impact our

lives have made on the world? Or will we believe the philosopher who rationalizes man's immortality on a dozen arguments? Well, none of these satisfy me. I will take my stand on the word of God, on the Bible. I will take the word of Holy Scripture where Jesus gives his word with certainty and conviction, "Because I live you will live also." As far as I am concerned, that closes the issue.

Is death a doorway or a dead-end? Since the beginning of time that is a question that has agitated the mind of man. In the Old Testament in the book of Job, Job raises the question, "If a man die, shall he live again?" And that is just another way of asking the question, is death a doorway or a dead-end. The New Testament answer to that question is that death is not dead-end. The New Testament comes down firmly, squarely, on the issue. There Jesus says unequivocally, "He that believeth on me shall never die." For the Christian, death was seen as a transition as a person moved out of the body into the presence of the Lord.

The Bible tells us that we do not have to be afraid of death any more. St. Paul raises the question, "O Death, where is thy sting." I have been told that when a bee stings something or someone, that its death warrant is signed. Once the stinger of the bee is gone, death comes to the bee. It leaves its sting in the wound and goes away to die. Never again can it sting anyone or anything. A child can play with that bee without danger or harm. The bee is defenseless and harmless for its sting is gone. On the cross the sting of death was buried in the body of Jesus Christ. St. Paul is telling us that we do not have to fear death any more. It is helpless. It can no longer hurt us. We need not be afraid for death has now lost its power over us. Thus, St. Paul cried out in joy, "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (I Cor. 15:57)

A beautiful story is told about Dwight L. Moody, the great evangelist. His family had gathered at his home in Northfield, Mass. to bid him farewell for the doctors said he could not live very long. They had all at last quietly left his room for the great man of God seemed to be sleeping. A sound inside caused them to return to the room and they found Moody sitting up in bed with his eyes wide open and apparently completely conscious of his surroundings. One of the relatives fell to his knees and began to pray that God would spare this man to serve him further. But from the bed came a sharp rebuke, "Do not pray that I may live. I have seen Dwight and Irene (his two grandchildren who had died), and I have seen the face of Jesus and I am satisfied. Earth is receding, heaven is opening; God is calling me; this is my coronation day!" And with that, this great servant of the Lord lay back upon his pillow and--and what?--why, he swept through the doorway of death right into the city of the New Jerusalem and into the presence of God!

Does that begin to make sense to you? The consequence of sin in human life is death--death in the spiritual sense in that we were cut off from God, but death also in the physical sense that we become subject to the grave. But the Bible tells us that God never stopped loving us. He was never willing to let us go. So Jesus came to take into his own sinless body the sting of death that belonged to us. That is the gift God offers us this morning--the gift of a renewed relationship to him that means a new spiritual life and the gift of the open grace, the promise to us that death is not a dead-end, but a doorway to life in a new dimension.

No, we are not sure today where the tomb of Jesus is. And we are not sure because it does not really matter. As the Bible says, "He is risen, he is not here; come see the place where he lay." You see, an unopened grave could never open heaven and a

dead Christ could never be a living saviour. The funeral they had for Jesus failed--it failed because God raised him from the dead. That open grave is God's pledge that you and I, if we are believers in Jesus, are going to live forever--it is his pledge that death is a doorway and not a dead-end.

I remember reading a story once that illustrates in a way what I am talking about. A father took his small son on a trip one day. As they walked along, they came to a rickety bridge over a rushing stream. The little boy became apprehensive, "Dad, is it safe to cross the stream?" The father answered, "Son, I'll hold your hand." So the boy put his hand trustingly in his father's and confidently walked across the bridge. That afternoon late they started the return trip home and when they came to the bridge again, the darkness had fallen. "Dad, I'm frightened. What about the rickety old bridge, what about the water?" The father reached down, took the little boy into his arms, and said, "Stay in Daddy's arms, Son. You will feel safe." As the father walked along, the little fellow fell asleep with his head on his father's shoulder. The next morning, when the child awoke, he was safe at home and in his own bed. The sun was streaming through his window and he never knew that he had crossed the frightening bridge and the turbulent waters. That is what death will be like. God will take us into his arms and when we awake we will be safely home. We will never even know that we have crossed over the frightening stream.

Recently I had the privilege of conducting the funeral of A. B. Lansing, a long-time member of this congregation. The family asked me to read a piece of material. It was something that I had never seen before, but it expresses so well the Christian view about death that I want to share it with you this morning:

I am standing upon the seashore. A ship at my side spreads its white sails to the morning breeze and starts for the blue ocean and is an object of beauty and strength and I stand and watch it until at length it hangs like a speck of white cloud just where the sea and sky come down to mingle with each other.

Then someone at my side says, "There, it's gone."
Gone where? Gone from my sight--that is all.

It's just as large in mast and hull and spar as it was when it left my sight and just as able to bear it's load of living freight to the place of destination.

It's diminished size is in me, not in him. And just at the moment when someone at my side says "There he is gone", there are other eyes opening watching him coming and other voices ready to take up the glad shout, "Here he comes!"

Yes, "here he comes!" Death is not a dead-end, it is a doorway to eternal life. That is God's promise to you and the empty, forgotten tomb of Jesus is the proof that the promise is good.