

"A Fresh Start"

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Let's join our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, empower us with your Holy Spirit for a fresh start. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.**

A Sunday school teacher was teaching a class of children about Creation. "Now, children," she said, "who can tell us what makes a plant grow from the seed?"

"God does it," exclaimed a little girl, "but fertilizer helps."

Jesus says that if a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it bears much fruit, but would it bear more fruit with the help of a little fertilizer?

One of the most destructive weeds that crop farmers must deal with is the Canadian thistle. It has an extensive root system that makes it extremely difficult to eradicate once it's established. The prolific roots crowd out other plants. Jesus tells us in a parable of a sower who went out to sow and some "seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them." Would the seeds bear more fruit with the help of a little weed killer too?

Our passage from the gospel according to John, begins by mentioning that "among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks." The "Greeks" represent the non-Jewish, gentile community. John is highlighting the importance of the new Christian church's mission to gentiles and the inclusion of gentiles in God's promise of salvation. Everyone is included and everyone is focused on Jesus as he tells them about his death and resurrection; and about his mission in the world.

Jesus uses imagery of the seed to describe his death and resurrection. On one level, it's the new life that emerges from what seems like a dry, "dead" seed when it's planted into the earth. It's like Jesus emerging from the tomb on Easter morning, and like the Disciples' new faith emerging from the grief of death. The grain of wheat, must, in a sense, be re-born to bear fruit. There's also the contrast between remaining solitary, "just a single grain," and "bearing much fruit" in

community. We must all die to selfishness and be re-born in the community of Christ.

Last Sunday, in our gospel reading from the gospel according to John, we focused on John 3:16, the most well-known verse in the Bible, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Today, we encounter death and eternal life again. The grain of wheat dies and is reborn. And those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Jesus, after being driven out and dying on the cross, will be lifted up from the earth and will draw all people to himself. Jesus describes his own death and resurrection. But he is also describing something that we don't understand very well, and that we have difficulty reconciling with our current scientific knowledge and understanding: the promise of our own eternal life.

As the themes of death, resurrection and eternal life become more prominent in our journey toward Palm Sunday and Good Friday and Easter Sunday, we're drawn toward Jesus' imagery of the grain of wheat dying and receiving a fresh start that bears much good fruit and how we might be a part of the imagery of this parable.

In the process of cleaning up a bunch of old books last week, Deb came across an old New York Times Bestseller called *Embraced by the Light* by Betty Eadie. I sat in the family room that evening and read it. It's about Betty's experience of dying after an operation. Betty says, "my spirit was suddenly drawn out through my chest and pulled upward, as if by a giant magnet." She sees her dead body, knows that she is dead, experiences feelings of incredible peace and joy and love, and is fascinated by her new state of being. Betty saw that "death was actually a 'rebirth' into a greater life of understanding and knowledge that stretched forward and backward through time." After realizing that she was dead, Betty travelled as a spirit to "see" her husband and children relaxing at their home. And then, accompanied by three "guardian angels," Betty is taken up through a whirling black tunnel toward a bright light that surrounds the figure of Jesus Christ, whose love filled Betty with joy to overflowing. Betty describes her encounter with Jesus and the meaning of life that she drew from Jesus. Betty also describes her incredibly strong desire to stay in the

heavenly realm, but “It was not yet [her] time.” Betty had an important mission to accomplish on earth and her dead body was resuscitated.

It was interesting to read Betty’s first-hand perspectives and recollections of her own death. In many respects, the first part of Betty’s journey is very similar to that of my friend Hany who told me privately about his experience of dying while having a relatively routine biopsy taken from his lung. Hany died on the procedure table and he describes looking down on his body and watching the medical team’s efforts to revive him as he was drawn upward into something totally blissful. Hany felt wonderful and didn’t want to return, but they resuscitated him and he descended back into his body. Hany was in a coma for a week, and then recovered, with his experience of death clearly and permanently etched into his mind.

Last week, in only two sittings, I watched the fascinating new 2021, six-episode Netflix docuseries called *Surviving Death*. It’s based on a book of the same name by investigative journalist Leslie Kean. The docuseries explores what happens after we die through personal stories and interviews with medical researchers who have completed decades of in-depth research on near-death experiences, spiritual mediums, signs from the dead, seeing dead people, and reincarnation.

In the first episode, orthopedic surgeon Dr. Mary Neal died by drowning in a 1999 kayaking accident. Dr. Neal, now 62, was pinned underwater beneath her overturned kayak for 30 minutes before friends rescued her. There’s no explanation for how she was able to be resuscitated and avoid brain damage. Neal said that “As a physician and a scientist and as someone who’s very concrete-thinking and pragmatic, I, too, would have rolled my eyes if I had heard my own story.”

During the half-hour that she was submerged, Dr. Neal said that she looked down on her body from a vantage point above it and felt herself travel to a place that she describes as heaven, where she encountered spirits of her departed ancestors and time seemed to slow down. There, the spirits informed her that her son would die, although they didn’t say when or how.

Dr. Neal described herself prior to her accident as “culturally Christian” in a casual way. But she emerged from her ordeal more spiritual and now refers to herself as a “child of God.” She sees no conflict between her scientific training as a

spine surgeon and her religious beliefs. "I spent many months [after the event] trying to come up with some sort of medical or scientific explanation, because I was told that my oldest son would die. And so, I was very motivated to find a reasonable explanation that could allow me to discount everything," said the mother of three. In 2009, her oldest son, Willie, was hit by a car and killed at age 20.

Dr. Neal's story of looking down on her body and encountering some type of spiritual world is common among people who have near-death experiences. The series director and producer Ricki Stern says that "People who have had the medical definition of death — flatlining — and are able to be brought back with the advent of resuscitative medicine have had these extraordinary experiences that are not unique."

In his prayer today, Jesus expresses pure love for God – love that is free from self-interest and self-love. Jesus prays and a voice comes from heaven to acknowledge and confirm Jesus' prayerful conclusion, "Father, glorify your name." Some think it's just thunder, but those who believe, hear heavenly angels so that when Jesus is lifted up from the earth, they will know that Jesus "will draw all people to himself." God's love and salvation are for each of us and in that confidence, we can have a fresh start and bear much fruit while we're planted here on earth.

I don't know whether a little fertilizer or weed killer might help, but I'm convinced through glimpses of the spiritual realm that I have had through my own experiences, and hearing about the experiences of others who have died or received insights from people who have died, that Jesus was telling us an important truth about life and death and life after death – about his own death and resurrection; and about eternal life that also awaits us like the rebirth of a grain of wheat. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week that will take us to Jerusalem; and then to the Cross, and to the grave, and to new and resurrected life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Thanks be to God. Amen.