

He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone, ²²saying, “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised.”

²³Then he said to them all, “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. ²⁴For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. ²⁵For what does it profit them if they gain the whole world but lose or forfeit themselves? ²⁶Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. ²⁷Indeed, truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.”

Most of you are aware that before I was Pastor Gin, I was Chaplain Gin. I worked as a hospice chaplain for ten years in San Antonio, Texas. During that time, I saw literally thousands of patients. Some I met only once. Others, I knew for many years. My youngest patients were in their late teens and early 20s. The oldest were over one hundred. They had every possible disease from cancer to dementia, HIV, MS, ALS, heart disease, COPD, and more. Some had large, emotionally healthy families, some had none. Some had dysfunctional families and arguments about care plans. Some were articulate about the end of their life and some were non-verbal, but just when I thought I had seen it all, I realized that every patient could teach me something new.

Prior to my training as a hospice chaplain, I was not familiar with end-of-life care. I lived at a great distance from the oldest members of my family and did not witness or participate in their physical or emotional care as they transitioned from this life to the next.

But that changed drastically with my hospice work, and now I am quite familiar with the physical process. What struck me the most about death is how the body shuts itself down. Of course, each person is unique and each disease process is unique, and so there

is no step-by-step instruction manual that every one of us will use, but for the most part, the human body is very capable of approaching death in a manner that creates the least amount of stress and pain possible. Our bodies know how to die.

And so, I am not so afraid anymore, but rather I am in awe. In awe of the miracle of death as much as I am in awe of the miracle of birth. To give birth to a healthy child requires ten trillion cells to communicate and cooperate with each other in a precise symphony of organization and balance and timing. And in the same way, dying requires trillions of cells to communicate and cooperate with each other, too. There is a magnificent order to it, even when it is complicated by disease or dementia or cancer.

And there is this incredible, faith-based hope that I have that life does not end when we draw our last breath here on earth. I cannot even begin to guess at what life looks like on the other side, but I do want to share a couple stories that I hope will be worthwhile.

One night, when I was on-call, I was summoned to an apartment in a large retirement community. The apartment was filled with beautiful paintings. It was like walking into a gallery. Landscapes and stills, oils and watercolors, just stunning. A family member noticed me admiring them and said that they were all done by the patient. She was in bed and having difficulty breathing and was understandably anxious. The nurse was giving her a breathing treatment, which helped, and when it was finished, I was invited to the bedside.

I introduced myself as the chaplain and complimented her on her paintings. She thanked me and then told me very clearly that she was not afraid to die. In fact, she wanted me to pray that she might go soon. She said, “Years ago, my heart stopped for several minutes, but they brought me back. During that time, I found myself in a place that had colors that I have never seen before. Beautiful colors. I want to go back to that place and see those colors again. It was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

I replied, “Colors you’ve never seen? Coming from such a gifted artist, that’s quite an amazing thing to say. You’ve worked with every shade and hue there could be.”

“Oh,” she said, “what we have here is nothing compared to what is up there. They won’t bring me back this time, will they?” The family nodded and assured her that was why the nurse and chaplain were there.

“No, ma’am,” I said. “We will make sure we honor your wishes. Your family knows how you feel. They will miss you, but they want what you want,” and so we prayed for a peaceful end, for strength, for hope, for faith. It was painful, but it was also so powerful.

I’ll never forget her words, and it leaves me asking, “Oh, Death, where is thy sting?”

And though I have never experienced it myself, I have seen the vast majority of patients, verbally and non-verbally reach out to an unseen presence in the room. I’ve heard them talk to loved ones, seen them make eye contact with those I cannot see, and be comforted by the presence of family that had already transitioned. I cannot deny what others have experienced. I can only report that I’ve seen it too many times to dismiss it. Whether it’s spiritual or neurological, the presence of loved ones has brought peace to the dying. So, I ask myself again, “Oh, Death, where is thy sting?”

I learned from a physician that one of the best things that you can do when a loved one is in their last stage of life is to let them know these five things.

*I love you.

*Thank you.

*Please forgive me.

*I forgive you.

*We’ll miss you, but we will learn to be ok.

When closure can take place and honest love and gratitude can be spoken, then “Oh, Death, where is thy sting?”

And when Jesus Christ, who has never failed or forsaken us tells us that he himself is willing to experience death, and that we who want to follow Jesus will gain our lives by

losing them, then “Oh, Death, where is thy sting?” For if Jesus is to be believed, then our lives truly would reflect the thought of the apostle Paul who wrote, “To live is Christ and to die is gain.” And I realize it is a ridiculous, irrational, nonsensical thing to say, but somehow, it is also true. Death is not the end of the story. Death is the transition that we will all inevitably make into life eternal.

For we are body and we are spirit. The body will perish, but the soul will never, ever die.

But let us not kid ourselves or be dismissive of the truth. There is no pain in the world like grief over a loved one. No pain. It lingers for as long as we live. It expresses itself in our own bodies and dreams. Grief is real and strong and lasts longer than our culture says it should. We weep for those we love, just as Jesus wept for Lazarus and the women wept at the foot of the cross, and death comes not just at the end of a full life well lived. Death can come early or unexpectedly from diseases and accidents and violence and mental health challenges and drugs. These can take our loved ones far too soon, and then we feel the grief of precious time with family or friends stolen away. Grief can impact our ability to function and care for ourselves and others. Death is still tragic and painful and cruel.

Oh, Death there is a sting. I do not mean to be dismissive, and in the same breath, today we remind ourselves that with that sting comes hope, that just as Lazarus and Jesus defied death and rose again, that we too have resurrection hope that our loved ones are only just beyond our sight and grasp. That there will be a joyous reunion of souls – someday and somehow. Just Sunday, we heard that someday and somehow, Moses and Elijah appeared on a mountainside and spoke to Jesus and encouraged him to make the journey to Jerusalem. And Jesus told the believers, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. ²⁵ For what does it profit them if they gain the whole world but lose or forfeit themselves?”

So we wear ashes tonight as a sorrowful reminder of our own physical mortality and the mortality of those we love. We wear ashes because we grieve death and we grieve that

our savior died that we might live. We wear ashes because we enter into a season of humble self-reflection and commit to journey with Jesus toward the cross. So, willingly receiving ashes is a powerful reminder of the faith that we have that the body is not all we have. There is a soul within each one of us, claimed by God Almighty, that will never, ever die. O Death, Jesus will have the final victory and so will we. Amen.