
How These Stories End

Luke 9: 28-43a

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on February 24, 2013 by Ms. Jocelyn Streid, Trinity '13

Duke Chapel Student Preacher for 2013

This is a story about a doctor and a boy. I met them both in a rural South African hospital two summers ago. It was one of those international volunteering summer programs, the sort where we students all say that we know we can't save the world, while we secretly look for chances to save the world. It wasn't long, though, before I learned that I wasn't saving anyone.

The boy arrived at the hospital the night before my first day in the pediatric ward. He was seven years old and delirious, suffering from an unknown illness. The only hospital with the technology to diagnose him was a lengthy helicopter ride away. The pediatrician didn't call the helicopter. He didn't do anything, actually, besides make the boy comfortable. Cognizant of the child's slim chances and weighed down with the responsibility of spending state resources wisely, he chose passivity in the face of disease. The next day, the boy stopped breathing in front of my eyes, and in an instant it was just like the movies – frantic nurses, chest compressions, the doctor's desperate counting of breaths. And then, minutes later, it was all over – the doctor called it, and the time of the boy's death matched the time of the doctor's decision. He handed the death certificate to the boy's father himself.

Never before had I watched someone die.

When I returned to school, a doctor asked me, "How would it have been different if that child were here, in the states?" I wasn't sure how to answer, so he told me. "Chances are, someone would have told the doctor, 'Do everything you can.' Chances are, the boy would have been airlifted to a fancier hospital. Chances are, he would have undergone test after test, examination after examination. And there's a pretty good chance he still would have died. Doctors can't do everything," he told me, "but we sure like to pretend we can." After all, no one wants to tell someone they're going to die.

Americans have a curious relationship with death. We see it all the time in movies, but, like baking a 12-layer cake or singing in front of Simon Cowell, it's one of those things most of us would much rather watch on TV than actually experience ourselves.

Think about the way we talk about death – we don't. We talk about passing away, or moving on, or no longer being with us. We kick the bucket or turn out the lights or, my favorite, become living-challenged. But to say that someone died – well, that's a little cruel, isn't it?

The death rate, however, has been pretty steady at around 100% for all of time and it doesn't look like it'll change anytime soon. Yet an inability to acknowledge death can put us in a difficult place when we actually get to the end of life. Too few doctors and patients have real conversations about options for the end. One study found that two months before death, half of all lung cancer patients hadn't heard their doctors use the word hospice. About 20% of Americans spend their last days in the ICU, and for far too many, death comes after a frantic assault of last-ditch desperate measures instead of peaceful acceptance of the end. It is easy to believe that everything that can be done ought to be done, even if it means sacrificing the quality of our remaining days. There's an old joke about all this:

Why do they put screws in coffins?

To keep the doctors out.

Healthcare in modern America has become a salvation project: the doctor is the savior, the illness is the sin, and death is the ultimate enemy. And so we end up with what theologian Stanley Hauerwas calls the sole imperative of modern-day medicine: to get out of life alive. Yet when curing, not caring, becomes the primary focus of medicine, it denies the reality of suffering and neglects the experiences of the sufferer. I remember the story of one woman with breast cancer. Her disease was advanced, her time was limited, and yet she felt compelled to sign up for the most aggressive treatments, spending her final weeks at the hospital instead of at home. “If I stop fighting,” she said, “then I’ll feel like a failure.”

There is nothing wrong with medicine, but there is something wrong in the way we trust it to stave off death. I get it – dying is scary. Watching the death of people you love is even scarier. It is natural to put our faith in the cathedral we call the hospital, with its shiny equipment and smart doctors and everyday promises of healing.

When my dad was diagnosed with cancer two years ago, I marveled at the answers that science provided and rejoiced in the surgery that saved his life. And though I may rail against medical culture, I know that I want to be a doctor, and that I want so desperately to heal. But healing doesn’t always happen – at least, not in the way we want it to. When medicine can’t be our savior, science doesn’t have the answers for the questions we want to ask.

So here is my question: where is Jesus in all of this?

I’ll tell you where he is. In today’s gospel lesson, he’s on top of a mountain, talking about death, because if there’s anyone who’s thinking about mortality, it’s the man who’s about to die for the sins of the world.

In the ninth chapter of Luke, about eight days after Jesus first tells his disciples that he’s going to die, he takes Peter, John, and James to the top of a mountain, where he prays. He’s prayed with them countless times before, but this time, something very strange happens. His face shines a dazzling white, Moses and Elijah appear, and they begin to talk to Jesus about his impending death in Jerusalem. It’s a somber subject but a spectacular scene, and there’s a reason why Luke bothers to tell us that Peter and his companions were struggling to stay awake – he is anticipating the encounter at the Garden of Gethsemane, where the disciples fall asleep right before Jesus is led away to his eventual crucifixion. This moment of glory on the mountain prefigures that moment of agony in the garden; for Jesus, splendor and suffering are one and the same.

Why, though, has God sent two heavyweight champions of the Old Testament to speak with Jesus on the mountain? Their presence ties Christ to the past, but it also sheds light on the meaning of his future. Luke says that Moses and Elijah speak to Jesus of “his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” Yet we already knew about all that – Jesus told us about his impending death and resurrection a chapter before. Here’s what’s unique about this line, though: the original Greek word, here translated as departure, is actually exodus.

Exodus. That sounds familiar, doesn’t it? An exodus isn’t just about leaving – it’s about leaving for something better. Moses parted the Red Sea and led the Hebrew people to freedom; Jesus will part the waters of hell, and in passing through, liberate all of humanity from the chains of sin. An exodus is never easy, but for Jesus, it will be unbelievably difficult. He must face what makes us tremble: he has to die. Yet Christ will flood the darkness of death with the light of liberation. Death is his calling; God the Father put him on earth, but he was never meant to stay. Neither are we, for that matter.

It’s good news – the best, in fact – but Peter, bless his heart, just doesn’t get it. He suggests that they build three dwellings on the mountain, one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus. He wants them to dawdle, missing their message of temporality altogether. Peter’s a person of the present. A rock, after all, is here to stay, and if Peter is the rock upon which the Church is built, then it is easy for him to have a vested interest in this world, not the next. I wonder how often we behave like Peter – as if we are rocks, as if we are permanent

fixtures of this earth. And so we often build our churches here instead of storing treasures in heaven. Churches to God, yes, but also churches to academic success, to romantic fulfillment, to domestic bliss, to worldly recognition. The thought of death threatens what we have built here on earth, shakes the foundation of the existence we've constructed. No wonder so many of us are so scared of death; it's a thief, snatching what's rightfully ours. We would much rather pretend that we'll always be around.

And so when his two Old Testament heroes show up, Peter is pleased as punch. Moses and Elijah? What kind of double-header cameo appearance is this? "It is good for us to be here," Peter gushes, and so of course he invites them to hang around. Maybe we can cut Peter some slack because he's just woken up from a nap, but still – his is an incredibly inane suggestion. He wants to make dwellings on earth for not only the glorified saints in heaven, but also for the savior who must leave the world in order to redeem it. Peter's like the guy who brings beef brisket to a Carolina BBQ: well-intentioned, but utterly clueless. He has no sense of the necessity of departure – like so many of us, he assumes that extending time on earth is an unquestionable objective.

It then comes as no surprise that the disciples cower when a divine cloud covers them – for anyone wedded to life on earth, nothing could be more frightening than the very presence of God. When the unknown faces them, they don't have faith to fall back on, but only fear.

I wish I could say that the disciples left their cluelessness on the mountain, but they still have a long way to go. After the glory of transfiguration on an isolated mountaintop, Jesus descends into the hot press of a chaotic crowd. A father asks him to heal his sick son; he says the apostles have already tried, only to fail miserably. Jesus is livid. He calls his disciples a "faithless and perverse generation." Here's the King of Kings, God's gift to the world, and he's saying, "How much longer do I have to put up with you?" Clearly, there is something terribly wrong with what the disciples did. But what was it?

Let's take second and think about what just happened. There was a man on top of a mountain, covered in a cloud, to whom God Himself spoke. We've seen this before; Jesus' mountaintop moment echoes that of Moses, who received the Ten Commandments when God appeared in a cloud on Mount Sinai. The connection between Jesus and Moses isn't coincidental – they were both destined for an Exodus, after all.

Consider what happened when Moses descended the mountain: he found a golden calf. He found his people worshipping false idols, and the rage he felt is like the rage of Jesus. Jesus has already given his apostles the power to cast out demons; they can't understand why they failed. Jesus calls them "faithless," but I bet that if you asked one of the disciples, this is what he would say: "I had plenty of faith! I thought I could do it, I really did!"

Yet the disciples, just like the calf-crazy Israelites, worshiped idols of their own. Jesus hasn't asked the disciples to have faith in their own abilities. Instead, he demands the sort of faith that Peter lacked on the mountain – a faith in a God so all-powerful that he not only conquers death, but utterly transforms it. This isn't faith in healing; this is faith in Jesus.

When faced with broken bodies, where do we place our faith? I worry it is in an antiseptic authority, glass-walled cancer center or gleaming surgical ward. I wonder if we worship in the churches of biomedicine, desperately pinning our trust to technology that promises to stave off death. Is a life indefinitely extended the ultimate goal? Is the end the ultimate enemy? As someone who wants to spend the rest of her life in medicine, I know that's how I feel. Yet we cannot believe in our own powers separate from those of God, for it is not we who draw the line between life and death, but Him.

When Jesus casts out the demon and meets Moses on the mountain, he is promising us liberation, even and especially in death. But being near death – your own or that of others – rarely feels like liberation. It feels like heartbreak. It feels like wandering aimlessly through the desert or like being nailed on a cross for all to see. It feels like being forsaken.

And yet.

And yet we know how these stories end.

There is nothing – nothing – wrong with praying for healing and hoping for life – Jesus healed the boy in the gospel reading, after all. But to assume that more life is the only sort of blessing there is, is to forget how big God is.

There is room in this faith – there is room in our God – for all the pain and all the sorrow and all of the brokenness of death. There is so much room, in fact, that it all pours out into eternal life.

We can and we should treasure modern medicine, but we cannot put our faith in our doctors, our hospitals, our latest drug trials, or ourselves. We can only put our faith in God. And sometimes, God heals. That's what happened with the demon-possessed boy. And sometimes, God knows that it's time to die. That's what happened with Jesus. And because of Jesus, death, no matter how painful or frightening or foreign, is an achingly beautiful invitation into God's glory. It is freedom. It is release.

It is exodus.