

Suzan Walker Memorial Service  
January 6, 2017  
Southwick Community Episcopal Church  
Rev. Taylor Albright

There is a reason that we come to be church together at times like this. Yes, there is comfort, a religious ritual, and it is just what we do, or, at least, what we used to do.

But there is another, more central, more powerful reason.

It has something to do with a theme, a double-edged theme that ran through all four of our readings tonight. And, well, it runs through all of the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation. It is a daring combination, and the attitude of the Biblical writers, especially the ones after Jesus, are full of attitude, the attitude that an underdog who has just beaten the undisputed world champ, or a David after Goliath.

The Goliath part of the theme is death. Not abstract death, or something less, but full on, the very thing that is at the bottom of all fears and really scary moments in life.

Death. We would do all we can to make death seem less than it is. In fact, we hardly even hear the word any more. We refer to say something like, "Passed on." As if our loved one had decided to keep on sailing and has missed the dock, and they simply passed on.

But the Biblical writers might be accused of all kinds of things, but they certainly don't avoid telling the truth when it comes to death. Only, they write as if they had discovered something, like the weakness of the school yard bully.

It is part of the theme of the entire letter to the new believers in Colossae.

Paul has written to them and said, "You have died, and your lives are hidden with Christ." The section we read tonight comes as a part of an either-or decision we have to make.

We can live the old way, which can't give life, or we can live the new way, a way made possible by Jesus' death and resurrection. We can put to death the old impulses toward greed and self-focus and live differently – with compassion, kindness, humility. The gravity of Death has been beaten.

As Paul was anticipating his own death for his uncompromising life of faith, he wrote to Timothy, preparing him. and encouraging him to live boldly in the face of death, to live toward life beyond the fight, the life that awaits all who log for his appearing here again. Death giving way to the inevitability of life.

Psalm 23 has been the encouragement of so many for more than 2500 years. Yes, even though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for God, our good and faithful shepherd, is leading us. Where? To green pastures, and still waters and, even at the worst of circumstances, my cup overflows. With what? Life! Life in the face of death.

And, Jesus, on the night where only he knew of the coming betrayal and passion and his own death, comforts his friends, makes them ready. I am the way, the truth, and the LIFE. In me, you have life! Life right now, life that I have prepared for you, that is yet to come.

There is Death, real and destructive, looming like an assassin, the undefeated and undefeatable heavyweight champ. Confident as if there was nothing that could stop it.

But there is God.

And God has been bringing life out of death from the first moment of Creation when the Spirit of God hovered over the waters and created a world out of darkness.

And, with the resurrection of Jesus, the earliest Christians get it.

Death does not win! God wins! Christ has won for us life!

Their confidence in the face of death was so strong that they made the symbol of the worst kind of death in their age – capital punishment – death

on a cross, their own symbol of victory! You may be wearing one tonight. The cross, once the sign of death, has become the sign of life!

It was part of their initiation of new believers. They weren't just cleansed in baptism, but they were buried in baptism, buried with Christ, and risen with him to new life.

It was in their songs – O Death, where is your sting, O death, where is your victory?

As one writer has said, We are rejoicing in the presence of the Kingdom of God, not the kingdom of death, The power of God, not the power of death, The glory of God, not the glory of death.

God is the source of life, and through Christ, God has overcome death and brought us into life.

So, we gather here as church, not simply because it is a religious ritual , or even to get closure, but to be reminded and to remind each other that death, though real, has not won. And cannot win.

That, through Christ Jesus, we have been ushered into life.

And so our prayer is that, In death, life is not ended, but changed.

But...

We are also here to acknowledge our loss. At least temporarily. The loss of someone who dearly loved you, and who you dearly loved.

And that kind of loss is hard.

Even Jesus wept at the grave of his friend, Lazarus. So we also gather to be church for those who have suffered loss. To be the arms of love and compassion because we know the pain of loss.

But we also know the power of hope. And so we grieve freely, without fear or remorse, but with hope and love.

And with joyful thanksgiving because we know that Suzan has fought the good fight. She has run her race. She has kept the faith.

And she lives.

She lives in the presence of God with a crown of glory. And, when the final trumpet sounds, and the dead in Christ rise, we will all rejoice in him forever.