

Easter 2008

NIV John 20:1-20

1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. 2 So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

3 So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb.

4 Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, 7 as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. 8 Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. 9 (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

10 Then the disciples went back to their homes, 11 but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb 12 and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

13 They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." 14 At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

15 "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

16 Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

17 Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

18 Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

The April 2008 edition of *Parents* magazine contains an article by Christina Frank titled, "Saying Goodbye." Beneath that title, she states her goal, in these words, "Sooner or later, you'll have to explain the concept of death to your child. Our guide will make it easier to find the right words."

Of all the different "talks" that parents have to give to their children, sooner or later, this one, about death, rates a level of difficulty and discomfort right at the top of the list. Just like that other "talk."

You might even say that death is the most difficult topic for a parent to discuss with their child, for at least with that other one, you can speak from experience.

Dealing with death is unavoidable, and so articles like Mrs. Frank's make good material for parenting magazines. This author chooses to begin with her own family's experience of death, in a story I'd like to share with you now. Mrs. Frank writes,

"When her great-uncle died a couple of years ago, my daughter Lucy, then 4 [years old], took it pretty well. And she seemed to really grasp what death meant. Or so I thought. A few days after the memorial service, she began peppering me with questions: "When will Uncle Jerry be undead?" "Where did he go?" "Now that he died, will he be born again?"

[She writes,] I didn't know what to say. And I'm far from the only parent who has stammered her way through an awkward conversation on the topic. "Death is very difficult for young children to understand, and it can be tough to explain," says *Parents* advisor David Fassler, M.D., clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of Vermont College of Medicine, in Burlington. The best advice: Keep your answers as short and simple as possible, and use these responses as a model."

Her article continues in a Question/Answer format, beginning with this:

Q My 4-year-old keeps asking me, “Mommy, why did Grandma die?” What should I say?

A When a little kid asks such a big question, you may be tempted to soft-pedal the truth. Don't do it: Telling him that, “Grandma went to sleep” or “We lost Grandma” will only backfire. “You might confuse your child or even make him afraid to go to sleep at night,” says Dr. Fassler.

Instead [he suggests] say something like, “Your grandma died because she was very old and sick. She doesn't talk or breathe anymore, and we won't see her again. But the love we had for her will stay with us forever.” If it helps, you can compare a person's life to a tree's leaves, which bloom in the spring, then change color and die in the fall.

[The author then gives this example.] When Donna Maria Johnson's father died, she told her kids, Vanessa, then 5, and Brooks, then 3, that when people get very old, their bodies stop working, just like when a toy's batteries run out. “But then I explained that you can't replace a person's batteries,” says the mom from Charlotte, NC. “That made sense to them.”

Q My father died recently, and my daughter wants to know where he is now. What should I say?

A That depends on your religious beliefs. “For many families, heaven is an important source of comfort,” says Greg Adams, director of the Center for Good Mourning at Arkansas Children's Hospital, in Little Rock. But don't introduce it too early: The

notion of a person's being dead physically but alive in a spiritual place is too abstract for most kids under age 5. "Until they are ready, heaven can wait," Adams says.

[The article goes on to say] You can also let your child decide for herself about the afterlife. Say something like, "No one knows for sure. Some people think you go to heaven when you die, while others believe people come back on earth as different creatures. What do you think?"

In bold print at the bottom of the page is this question, one guaranteed to widen the eyes and raise the pulse of any parent to whom it is asked.

"Am I going to die, mommy?"

In response, the author suggests saying this:

When a young child hears that someone died, it's natural for him to wonder whether he'll die too. When he asks, respond honestly but gently. You might say, "Everybody dies eventually, but most people live for a long, long time, and I'm sure you will too." Let him know that you'll do everything in your power to keep him safe and healthy. Your child may also start worrying about your well-being. If he does, say something like, "Honey, I plan to live a very long time – until you're a grown-up with kids of your own."¹

After reading all of Christina Frank's article, I get the sense that she approaches death with this understanding - death is final. Death is an ending. Looking at her answers, it appears that the best we can do is hope for a long and fruitful life. The best we can do is hope that the legacy we leave behind will be a beneficial one, that people will think

1 Christina Frank, "Saying Goodbye" *Parents* magazine, April 2008. pp. 64-65.

well of us after we're gone.

Setting down the magazine, with my heart disquieted within me, a voice inside exclaimed, "No, I can't accept it. That's not enough."

The answers I'd just been given to the problem of death, how to explain it to my children – they wouldn't cut it. No. I want more. More from life. More of life.

And I want more from God.

I expect more from the God who creates so much so beautifully, on both a cosmic and a microscopic scale. Given God's power, God's wonder, God's creativity, I can't accept that God would allow, that God would just stand silently by, as death breaks in, tracking dirt and pain across the landscape of creation. I can't accept that God has no other answer to death for us except to say, 'Well, I guess time's up. We'll remember you fondly.'

Even when death comes to those full of years, those who have lived life to the fullest, made the most of every day, it comes too soon. Whenever death arrives, it always comes before we've had enough, of an experience, of a relationship, of life's wonderful depth and meaning.

Seventy years? Too soon. Eighty? Just getting started. Ninety? You're just at the beginning of wisdom and real insight. We were made for much more than just what we see and hear and learn and know during the few short decades we spend in this world.

And what about the young? When death comes to the young, whether by trauma or by tragedy, then we clearly see and feel what a great insult death is to God's intention

for the wondrous, the marvelous, the God-reflecting, God-bearing creatures that we are.

Last week, I requested prayers for the family of Rob and Carole Visscher, whose youngest son, Andrew died on March 10th, two weeks ago tomorrow. 5 year old Andrew was born with cystic fibrosis. Cystic fibrosis is an inherited chronic disease that affects the lungs and digestive system of about 30,000 children and adults in the United States. A defective gene and its protein product cause the body to produce unusually thick, sticky mucus that: clogs the lungs and leads to life-threatening lung infections; and obstructs the pancreas and stops natural enzymes from helping the body break down and absorb food.²

All his life, even on his good days, Andrew lived in poor health. He had difficulty breathing. He couldn't always keep up with his peers, and he took lots of medications and received lots treatments.

My family got to know the Visschers because Rob served as the pastor of Calvary United Methodist Church in Waymart, a church just down the street from our home. Lisa and our kids spent many Wednesday mornings in the nursery of that church with Carol and Andrew, attending the community playgroup that Carol hosted. Isaac, my oldest son, is about Andrew's age, and the boys enjoyed every chance they got to play together.

We got news of Andrew's death right about the same time that *Parents* magazine arrived in our mailbox. And as the article rightly assumes, Lisa found herself in the difficult, uncomfortable position of having to talk to our son about what had happened to his friend.

² Web search "Cystic Fibrosis." www.cff.org. About CF.

Lisa was afraid of how Isaac would respond. She was nervous about what and how much to say. And she took a decidedly different approach than what Mrs. Frank's article suggests.

Lisa graciously wrote down her conversation about Andrew's death with our 5 year old Isaac, and agreed to let me share some of those words with you this morning.

Since several months had passed since Isaac and Andrew last saw each other, Lisa began with this question:

-Isaac, do you remember Andrew from playgroup? Carol's son?

--Yes.

-Do you remember that he was sick? We had to be extra careful not to bring any extra germs by him, because he could get really sick really easily?

--Yes.

-Well, Andrew died.

[Lisa says that] At this point, Isaac, who had been sitting down, knelt bolt-upright, rolled his eyes up into his head and fell over in the way he often responds to a shocking revelation.

After he returns to sitting: [he said to Lisa]

--You mean a *kid* died? That's very strange, that a kid would die.

-It is strange. You don't really expect it, do you?

--No. . . . Mommy, (climbing onto my lap) I know you and daddy would be really really sad if I died, but then I would get to go to heaven and hug Jesus! (excited voice)

-Yes you would.

--(more contemplative voice) Jesus would have to be my Daddy for a while.

-Yep, he would. You know how we pray "Our Father," Jesus was telling us to call God Daddy.

At this point, Isaac's body becomes more animated, more excited. Actually it has been becoming more so from the point of getting up from falling over.

--Yeah, I would call God Daddy. I would get to hug God. Mommy, who's bigger, God or Jesus?

-Well, Isaac, Jesus *is* God.

--Ohhh yeahh, I know that. Well in heaven, who do I hug? How does it work?

-It's hard to understand Isaac, I don't understand it Isaac. Jesus is God, we know that, and we know he looked just like any other man . . .

--Yeah, I'll get to hug Jesus.

[At that point, Lisa and Isaac got into a debate about how God can be three persons all at once, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I'm afraid it's the price our children will have

to pay for having two seminary graduates for their parents. Pray for them. They'll need it.

Later that night, as Isaac was getting ready for bed, he talked more to Lisa about Andrew's death.]

--Mommy, I don't think it's fair that Andrew gets to be in heaven and I don't.

-Well . . .

--Mommy can we fly in heaven? Are there clouds?

-I'm not sure, Isaac. I'm not sure what heaven's like. I think of it like the Garden of Eden.

--The Garden of Eden?

-Yeah, the place God made when he first made people, the perfect place for people to be. I think there will be ground and dirt to work in and a garden to grow.

--(happily) Yeah. [The boy loves dirt.]

-You know, Andrew was always very sick, even when he was a little baby.

--Yeah.

-And he always had trouble breathing, like taking a deep breath was hard for him. And I like to think of Andrew as being able to take nice big deep breaths now.

--Yeah, that's good.

[When they got to the point in Isaac's going to bed routine where we say prayers, Lisa asked.]

-Do you want to pray tonight?

--I'm too tired.

-Yeah, you're exhausted. Maybe you can pray in the morning when you wake up.

--Yeah. That's a good idea.

-Maybe you should pray for Carol and Rob.

--Who?

-Andrew's mom and dad. And his brothers.

--Why?

-Well, how do you think they might be feeling right now?

--Ohh. Sad. They miss Andrew.

-Yeah, so maybe we can pray for them and ask God to help them feel better and remember that he's in heaven.

--Yeah. And I'm going to ask God to tell Andrew I said Hi.

If the good news is true. If Mary's report, her words to the disciples are accurate. If Jesus really is alive, his grave empty. Then we can say with sure and certain hope that yes, when it comes to death, ours or someone else's, Easter makes all the difference in the world.

When death with Jesus Christ leads to resurrection with Jesus Christ, then death loses its hold on us. In, and through, and because of God's love for us in Jesus, death is no longer the end of the story.

As Jesus claims us, seals us, adopts us as his own, death becomes not just the end of our sorrow or the end of our suffering, but rather the beginning of our restoration. Death becomes the start of life as God always wanted it to be – life abundant, life victorious, life restored.

Isaac, reflecting on his friend's death, was sad, and sorry, but he was also a little jealous. Somehow, that feels right to me. To think that Andrew now runs without ever losing his breath, that he plays and enjoys all that God his heavenly Father has created for him. That he stands renewed, whole, healthy, for the first time, in the presence of Jesus Christ, the risen Lord.

That's what I want from life. That's what I want for my children. Praise be to God, that's what God wants for his children too.

In talking to Isaac about Andrew's death, she mentioned the garden of Eden, paradise, the world before sin, as the place that Jesus has come back from the grave to prepare for us.

In our passage from John, Mary first sees the risen Jesus and mistakes him for the

gardener. Maybe that's no mistake. For it is in a garden lush with life and light and joy that we'll see Jesus next. There, like he did for Mary, Jesus will provide what we search for, answer our questions, he will welcome us back.

Mary's Easter journey led her from being lost to being found. It lead the disciples from fear to joy. Today, even here, even now, Jesus promises us the same.

This Easter, may you too look into the grave, and find it barren, and powerless, nothing to fear.

Full of faith in Jesus, our Savior, our teacher, our faithful friend and brother, may you thank God for empty crosses. Thank God for empty tombs. Thank God for Easter love, and for the life everlasting. Amen.