

**O Death, Where is thy Sting?
The Rev. Rob Gieselmann**

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A drought struck the land. It would not rain again until the prophet Elijah said so. Not God, but Elijah. God had deferred to Elijah, and I am guessing it was because God likes partnering with people who have big hearts, people who want to help other people.

Indeed, both Elijah and God worried about those who would suffer during the drought. And when Elijah ran into this woman who was so afraid the drought would kill her, she forgot to live – I'm going to fix one last meal for my son and myself, and then we'll die, she said - Elijah wanted life for her, and not death – But life would happen in an unthinkable way! For Elijah could have called rain down from heaven – the rain would have saved her – But rain would have been too easy. Any old prophet can walk out into the middle of some parched field, raise his arms to heaven and command the skies to rain.

To be sure, the skies would have resisted, at first – who is this ordering us to rain? But Elijah would have thrust his arms more forcefully upward – Distant clouds would have billowed at his command, rolled and roiled forward like tumbleweeds in the sky. Thunder and lightning – and the grey silt covering the parched ground would have swirled in confusion about Elijah's feet. But finally, the rain would have poured. Thirsty fields would have drunk the water, and the drought would have ended.

But Elijah didn't do it this way. Instead, he multiplied grain and olive oil into food – atoms and molecules that did not exist before now - saving mother and son in this extraordinary and unexpected way.

And that, you see, is faith's irony. Nothing with God happens the way it should – This woman and her son should have died, but they lived. And later, that same boy should have lived, but he died. And even then, he should have stayed dead, but Elijah called him back.

The same thing happened with Jesus, in an essentially identical situation – The boy should have stayed dead, but Jesus called him back to life. Young man, come back!

And let's not forget Paul – Paul had confused faith with living a sanctimonious life. But he was wrong – and in his case, religion inhibited his faith. Paul would never find faith unless he abandoned religion.

So you see – in all cases, faith means nothing, if it doesn't mean first that the rules have changed.

Now, I've had death on the brain, lately. I suppose it's because I've been teaching this three-part class on death and spirituality. The class has reminded me of Laura's, my wife's, death – but it has also brought to mind my own death. This may shock you, but it appears that I'm not going to make it out alive, after all.

Some smart-aleck psalmist claims this to be a good thing for me: Lovely in the sight of the Lord is the death of one of his Saints.

Paul is just as irritating: To live is Christ, to die is gain.

But isn't death – you know, death? Dark death that ends it all, separates you from people you love – But here are people of faith and hope claiming death has no teeth, a barking dog with no bite. To Elijah, death was noth'n and he called the boy back. To Jesus, death was noth'n, and he called that boy back. Paul wants to die and the psalmist says death is beautiful. Do all these people live in some surreal world with different rules than ours?

Their acquiescence reminds me of the playwright August Wilson, who said: Death ain't nothing. . . . Death ain't nothing but a fastball on the outside corner. It is as though the harmony of inches and not the dissonance of universes has separated the boy from his mother, when Jesus simply commanded him, Boy! Come back! In this vignette, I hear echoes of those people who have reported near death experiences, and were told, its not your turn, yet. Called back, as though death is merely a veil separating two worlds.

In her poem, Called Back, Emily Dickinson wrote of almost dying, and then not dying –

Just lost [or dead] when I was saved!
Just felt the world go by!
Just girt me for the onset with eternity,
When breath blew back,
And on the other side I heard recede the disappointed tide!

It just wasn't her time. And for these boys with widowed mothers, it just wasn't their time. And I know, for so many people you and I have loved, it wasn't their time, either, only they weren't called back.

There was no Elijah, no Jesus, no angel returning them to this world. And I don't know why not – And perhaps that is why we are so afraid of death – Death robs and steals, it threatens not only our existence, but that of those we just don't want to lose.

But the problem isn't death itself - Death is noth'n, noth'n but a fastball on the outside corner . . . It is just a veil, a thin division between worlds. The problem is fear. Fear is the enemy. Fear of death, and for so many people, there is this fear of living.

Fear collapses lungs, constricts the chest, and squeezes life out of you. Fear is death – and it isn't just fear of death that keeps so many people from living – Although let's be honest – we don't talk openly about death in our society because we are so afraid of it – Rather, people don't live fully because they are simply afraid. Afraid perhaps of the dark parts of the soul. Or afraid of something else – Of the possibility of poverty, or loneliness, or cancer or estrangement. The person afraid is the one inside the bier – the casket – carried forward by friends mourning your passing –

But Jesus refuses to let your casket pass without the surprise command – Young man, Come Back. Just lost when I was saved. And breath blew back. Rob, return. Jane, return. Sarah, return. Young man, come back! You can live, and not die. You can hope and not be afraid. For don't you see – death is noth'n. And we are Easter People. To Easter people, death is noth'n. Noth'n but a fastball on the outside corner.