Let me state at the outset that the primary purpose of a funeral sermon is to praise God. The letter to the Ephesians makes it clear that our very *raison d’être* is to praise God (Eph 1:12). Everything we do has one focus: praise. More, Paul tells us that there is but one thing he wishes to know: “Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2).

In Matthias Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece*, John the Baptist stands pointing to Jesus. John’s pointing finger is curiously large and out of proportion to the rest of his body.¹ John’s vocation was to point. Ours is as well—to point and to praise. There may never be an occasion as important for such pointing as a funeral. Here we can and must proclaim the Living One who defeated death and welcomes us all from this life into another.

That being duly granted, I propose that funeral sermons ought liberally to speak well of the deceased. To eulogize, however, is not to lie. A few years ago I was at a funeral of a relative who was, to tell the truth, a cranky old man. When the pastor began his sermon with the assertion that the deceased was a kind and gracious person, the family actually laughed; they were unlikely to believe anything else that pastor said.

Orson Scott Card, in his novel *Speaker for the Dead*, describes someone who is called on to speak for the dead, someone who was expected to research and know the deceased.² The speaker was expected to tell the truth, the whole truth, and wholly name the person for all the person was. Wonderfully, therapeutically, and compassionately, the speaker was expected to recall and assess the deceased person’s life.

We should do similarly. A good funeral sermon begins days before the funeral with the pastor carefully listening to the principal mourners. The pastor may not have known the deceased, but by the time of the sermon, the family and friends must be able to feel that the pastor understood, that the pastor “got it right.” I sug-


(continued on page 82)
The Funeral Sermon: Proclaiming the Gospel

JOHN E. QUAM

What should a funeral be? Is it thanksgiving for life—or, as it is often termed, “a celebration of the life of the deceased”? Or is it to be a proclamation of hope, a telling of the gospel of resurrection in Jesus Christ? Since, especially for readers of this journal, the funeral will be understood as a service of Christian worship, this strongly suggests an emphasis on the proclamation of the gospel of hope through our Savior Jesus Christ.

Of course, the funeral is a service for a person who is remembered and often honored by the many who attend the funeral. It would be very strange were there no mention or remembrance of the deceased. Our worship includes thanksgiving to God, including thanks for the gift of the one who has died, often with some specific remembrances.

The “celebration of life” theme has, however, become commonplace these days. I often wonder if it derives from another contemporary commonplace, namely, that everyone is going to heaven. Why? Perhaps this is a form of universalism, but I have even heard funeral sermons that seem to imply that the deceased is going to heaven because she has done so much good during her lifetime—certainly not our understanding of the gospel!

In my pastoral experience, the “thanksgiving for life” sermon often becomes redundant. The service has already typically included “a word of remembrance” by one or more family members. Some of these “words” frequently last as long as half an hour or more, even though we have agreed together on the necessity of brevity, particularly in consideration of the many older persons who will be at the funeral. Thus, if I refer to some facts about the deceased, I must preface them with “as you just heard his daughter describe…”

Of even more importance, regarding the funeral as “celebration” often overlooks the pain and loss for the family and friends of the person who has died. The death is regularly described as a good thing by the use of the statement, “He is in a better place.” But the sense of loss will come quickly. The changed family routines will be a constant reminder of loss. The many and varied feelings of grief will have

(continued on page 83)
gest that the sermon itself start by speaking honestly and compassionately about
the dead. To eulogize, to speak well, in this context does not mean that we simply
say nice things. It means we have taken the care to speak well as we caringly speak
about the person.

But why start with the dead instead of the Living One? (Perhaps you hear an
angelic objection: “Why seek the living among the dead?”) I have been doing fu-
nerals for over thirty-two years. I have also been a mourner at too many funerals. I
can tell you that when mourners enter the worship area for a funeral, their minds
are full of the person they are mourning. They are flooded with memories, plagued
with associated grief, frightened of a life without their loved one, and full of re-
membered joys for the one they can no longer be with. To hear nothing but Jesus-
talk would feel like being pelted with platitudes by a pastor who was clueless about
their real life and very real grief.

We need to meet the grievers where they are. We need to start with what fills
their minds. We need to start with the deceased. When we have taken the time to
listen carefully to the mourners prior to the funeral, when we take notes and actu-
ally quote the mourners, they will hear the sermon. They will feel the deceased was
understood. They will feel heard and understood. And having heard the truth
about the dead one, they will trustingly be more receptive and eager to hear about
One who is the truth and the life.

I have found the best way to gently guide the minds of the mourners toward
Jesus is by saying what good can be said about the deceased. Then we can let the life
of the dead begin to point to the death of the Living One. We can meet the mourn-
ers where they are in their grief and gently help them turn their eyes upon Jesus.

There is nothing new here. This is the age-old missional movement. Paul was
willing to be “all things to all people” (1 Cor 9:22) and eager to meet Athenians
where they were (Acts 17:22). Good missionaries throughout the centuries have
first taken the time to learn the language, the music, and the culture of the people
they are seeking to love.

Good missional pastors must first take the time to learn about the deceased,
the language of the grieving ones, and the culture of their family. Then they can
lovingly, gently, point to Jesus. When we avoid the deceased, we awkwardly—even
uncaringly—fail to meet people on their level. Pastors who fail to eulogize are like
pastors who try to greet their twenty-first-century audience with sixteenth-century
arguments, seventeenth-century language, and nineteenth-century hymns. They
fail to know their audience. They fail to love their people. When that happens, it
becomes difficult to point, to praise.

We must be caring speakers for the dead so that we can be faithful speakers
for the Living One. 🙏

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their effect. Should not the funeral provide some help for the present and oncoming grief as well as some good memories of what was?

Along with all those memories, the reality before us is a casket containing a dead body or a tiny urn containing all that is left of a human being, a loved one. We are still left with the question, “Is this the end? Is there more?” If there is “a better place,” should not the sermon tell that story? The message of the funeral is still the gospel of Jesus Christ. Most of those we serve at the funeral have been promised that in baptism they “died with Christ and rose with him” (Rom 6:1–5; Col 2:11–12). Many of the memories of the dead person recall that he or she has lived this promised life. They lived as they did in the assurance that “the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible” (1 Cor 15:52 KJV).

The family that has lost a loved one needs to be assured that the death they see before them is not really the end. There is more. There is resurrection because Jesus died and rose from the dead. There will be a new day, a day of resurrection prepared by Jesus in his victory over sin and death—the Easter story.

In recognizing the loss and grief that the family and friends have experienced, there is a need to assure them that they are not alone. Christ is risen! He is present now with comfort and strength for them to continue to live their daily lives. Christ is still here in his body—the church that is gathered at the funeral, expressing their thanks for the life of the departed and offering comfort and strength to friends and family now and for the coming days. Moreover, it is important to remind all these worshipers of the gift in their own baptism of dying and rising with Christ, providing daily forgiveness, the strength to live each day, and the assurance that for them, too, the end is not an end, but the promise of resurrection and eternal life through Jesus Christ our Savior.

Yes, the funeral is a time of thanksgiving for God’s gift. We give thanks for the gift of the loved one and the life that we are remembering. But even more, we give thanks to God for Jesus’ victory over sin and death and the promise of a place in the Father’s house with many rooms.

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