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 First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
 Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 15, 201
 Text: John 12:20-26

Transitions: Life Is Goodbye; Life Is Hello

Introduction to Scripture

Our first reading is *Deuteronomy 34:1-9*.

Our second reading is from the 12th chapter of John. Starting in the 11th chapter, John begins to pull the threads of the plot together as the story of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection approaches—what John calls the hour of Jesus' glory. Beginning in chapter 11 we get the foreshadowing events of Lazarus's death and Jesus resurrecting him, then the Pharisees and priests plotting Jesus' demise, Mary anointing Jesus at Bethany as for burial, and Jesus' coming to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday as people were gathering for the festival of Passover. Next comes our text. It begins with some Greeks, i.e. some Gentiles, wanting to see Jesus. Listen again for God's word: *John 12:20-2*

Sermon

Life is full of goodbyes. I spent the month before coming to Athens saying a lot of goodbyes. Goodbye to people I had grown to love dearly the six years I spent in Abbeville, SC. Goodbye to small-town life where you could get anywhere you wanted to go in tow minutes tops. Goodbye to books and files I culled as I cleaned out my office.

You know about goodbyes. There's the goodbye when the school year ends. Another crop of students walks out your classroom door, those seats never again to be filled by this particular bunch. There's the goodbye when you are 18 years old and pack up and head off to college. You shut the door to your childhood with your teddy bear left behind on the bed. There's the goodbye when you leave a job. The familiarity of that workplace and those co-workers is lost along with the identity that came with the job.

The list of goodbyes in life goes on and on: divorce, declining health, dreams that don't materialize, one day giving up your driver's license. Life is so full of goodbyes, you'd think we'd get better at them. I know I haven't. They are just so hard.

Of course, the big goodbye is death. The older we get, the more time we spend going to funerals. The longer we live, the more final goodbyes we say to people we love and care about. Ultimately, one day we ourselves have to give up the ghost. We'd probably like to avoid that final farewell, wouldn't we?

The Tuck family did just that. In the children's book, *Tuck Everlasting*, the Tucks discovered immortality. Eighty years before the story opens, they drank from a spring in the woods. Unbeknownst to them its water was magic. Other people grew old and died, but the Tucks and their horse lived on, frozen at the ages they were when they sipped the magic water. They soon learned that immortality isn't such a good thing. They became nomads, moving from

place to place so as to keep their secret lest others would be tempted to live forever, too.

But secrets are hard to keep, and ten year old Winnie discovers their story. Mr. Tuck takes her aside and explains to her how the wheel of life, the cycle of birth and death, is a blessing. “If I knew how to climb back on the wheel, I’d do it in a minute,” he tells her. “You can’t have living without dying. So you can’t call it living, what we got. . . . I want to grow and change. And if that means I got to move on at the end of it, then I want that, too.”ⁱ

Death is just part of life, as John Coble quoted one of his sage young singers in a recent church newsletter.

We heard the story of the death of Moses. Moses had led the Hebrews out of Egypt and was with them forty years in the wilderness, leading them toward the Promised Land. For two generations he did his darnedest to shape these ex-slaves into a people, Yahweh’s people, who loved and served the Lord and treated each other right. Finally they were ready to enter the Promised Land. Moses climbed up Mt. Nebo where God showed it to him. He could see it all—from the palm trees of Jericho, to the greening hill country, to the shimmering Mediterranean. He could see it, but he was not permitted to set foot in it. He died there in Moab. He died not getting to do what he had for the last forty years been looking forward to. And all those stiff-necked Hebrews he had cajoled and begged, gotten mad at, and cared about fiercely cried buckets when he died.

Life is full of goodbyes, whether we are ready or not. What makes all the goodbyes hard is that in some way they all are little deaths—our little deaths. In some way, some part of us is cut off. Some part of us is lost. The nearer and dearer the person or thing or place is to us, the harder it is to let go of it. We grieve. Goodbyes are hard.

But goodbyes are inevitable. We wish they weren’t, don’t we?

Jesus was coming down to the end of his life, to his last week. He could see how it was going to go down. He could read the handwriting on the wall. His death was imminent. He would be saying goodbye—goodbye to his twelve closest friends, goodbye to his family, goodbye to his followers, goodbye to his life’s work, goodbye to life itself. But in the goodbye he knew there was more than just an ending. “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Jesus knew that without death, there can be no resurrection. Without letting go, there can be no transformation. Without goodbye, there can be no hello, no making room for something new. He likened the process to a seed, stuck in the dark earth, shedding its little hull, losing its shape and identity as a seed, in order for something new to be released, in order for a root to push down and a shoot to sprout up, and for fruit to grow. Jesus knew that without death there could be no resurrection.

Resurrection is, after all, the heart of the gospel. If there were no resurrection, no Easter, we would not be here today. But it took Good Friday to get to Easter Sunday. At the time, of course, no one called that Friday good. It was horrible. It was heart-breaking. It was pain and suffering of the worst kind. Jesus died. But through the power of God, his death made way for something bigger, newer, different, transforming—the dawn of a new age. The covenant God had made with the Jews was blown wide open to include the whole world. It was only after Jesus’ death and resurrection that the way was opened for the Gentiles.ⁱⁱ Those Greeks who wanted to see Jesus in our text for the morning would find their way to him thanks to the resurrection. The promise of salvation for the whole world would be fulfilled through the hour of the Son of Man’s glorification, as John was wont to call it.

There’s no resurrection without death. Jesus talked about this in another way. All four gospels contain some version of the saying in our text today: “Those who love their life will lose

it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”ⁱⁱⁱ He’s talking about this same paradox of goodbyes holding the promise of hellos. He’s talking about losing your life in order to find it. All those little deaths in our goodbyes make possible all the new life that springs from hellos. As we are willing to let go of people, places, things we love, our hearts grow a little bigger. We discover other relationships, new purpose, wider horizons, greater service.

Ignatius was a second century bishop in Antioch. He was martyred for his faith. Given the choice by Emperor Trajan between apostasy or death, Ignatius chose death. He was willing to give up life in this world. He was willing to let go and say goodbye to everyone and everything. As he bravely went to the lions in the Circus Maximus, he cried out, “I am God’s grain.”^{iv} He was, of course, remembering Jesus’ words, “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

All the little deaths we die in order to be reborn, will it never end, we wonder. It seems like we never stop having to say goodbye. There’s always some loss we have to face. But remember, goodbye isn’t the end. In it is the promise of hello. As Shelley wrote, “If winter comes, can spring be far behind?” Spring can seem far, but it *will* eventually come. We’ve tasted it this past week, haven’t we? As we endure the winters of farewells, underground things are happening unseen. God is preparing our lives for new growth. God is making the way for us to say hello to new people, new places, new things, new ways of serving. Maybe you say hello to a new friend, a new hobby, a new commitment. Maybe you welcome a new spiritual discipline or a new attitude. When we say goodbye, we make room for something new to be born in us.

Whenever couples stand at the altar on their wedding day, they are saying goodbye in order to say hello. They say goodbye to a life that orbits around their own sun in order to say hello to life that has another person in the center with them. They say goodbye to one kind of relationship with their families of origin in order to say hello to a new family of in-laws and potentially a new family of children and grandchildren. A wedding videographer I knew used to conclude wedding videos not with the scrolling words, “THE END.” Instead they concluded with the scrolling words, “THE BEGINNING.”

I collect eggs. Eggs are a symbol of new life. They are a Christian symbol especially popular in Russia. I have several eggs I got when we adopted our daughter Anna in St. Petersburg. That whole experience of adoption, letting go of the dream of producing a biological child and welcoming an adopted child into our lives, was one of those goodbye-hello experiences. Going from the heartbreak of infertility, with seemingly endless rounds of disappointment and grief, to the joy of Anna was a death and resurrection experience. On one egg I brought back from Russia—along with our darling eight month old baby-- is written in Russian the ancient Easter greeting: “Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.”

There is no resurrection without death, no finding your life without losing it, no hello without goodbye. As we traverse this season of Lent, we are in the land of goodbye. Some of you have said goodbye to sweets, to wine, even to lunch. Some of you have said goodbye to a little free time so you can read a daily devotional book or goodbye to a little money so you can buy some extra canned goods for the food pantry. Lent is lived in the land of goodbye. It begins with ashes smeared on our foreheads in the sign of a cross as a reminder that someday we will return to dust, that we must learn to say goodbye to life itself. So for these six weeks of Lent we practice saying goodbye. The hope is that as we say goodbye to the glass of chardonnay or the

piece of cheesecake, we are learning to say goodbye to other things we hold dear, things that are harder to let go of. Things like our own high opinion of ourselves, our need always to be right, our prejudices, our fears. We are practicing our goodbyes so we can have room for the hellos God has in store, the hello that is the new life God is growing in us.

In this process we are becoming new creations in Christ. Did you know that when a caterpillar is transformed into a butterfly inside the cocoon, the caterpillar actually disintegrates. It becomes soup in the process of becoming a new creation. Transformation involves dissolution and not infrequently tears. It's hard! Goodbyes are hard! But remember, God is in this process as we follow the way of Christ which is the way of the cross. The Spirit is present, changing us for the better, making us finally whole, birthing us into what the Jesus in the synoptic gospels calls the "kingdom of God" and in the Gospel of John he calls "eternal life."

Life is goodbye. But thanks be to God, it is also hello. Amen.

ⁱ Natalie Babbitt, *Tuck Everlasting* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1975), p. 64.

ii. See John 12:32

iii. Matthew 10:39, Mark 8:5, Luke 17:33

iv. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), p. 475 and on 2/5/2015

<http://www.americancatholic.org/features/saints/saint.aspx?id=1171>