

We're all terminal

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [April 6, 2004](#) issue

Early on Easter morning, some women from Galilee went to the tomb where they had left Jesus. They came because they had been up all night, as people in grief often are, and because it is somehow easier to grieve at the grave site.

This is how the Easter story starts—not with everybody jumping to their feet to sing the “Hallelujah Chorus,” but with some women bringing spices to a tomb in order to keep Jesus’ dead, decaying body from smelling bad. It isn’t a very pretty image. Death never is.

My grandmother and her generation talked about death all the time, but they never mentioned sex in polite society. Now we talk about sex all the time but never mention death. If you want to bring a dinner party to a grinding halt, just try to get a good conversation going on death and dying. Soon guests will look at their watches and start talking about the babysitter’s curfew.

We used to talk about death as much as any other aspect of life. Children grew up with it. We saw it in our homes where the dying lay in their own beds. For those of us who lived on farms, death was all around. My grandparents knew better than to believe that if they wore their seatbelts, avoided smoking and ate a high-protein diet, they could avoid death. But in contemporary society we have found a way to remove death from our attention, at least until it comes.

Death is one of the major characters in the biblical drama. People are dying left and right throughout the story. The scriptures are embarrassingly frank. When Jesus prepares to raise Lazarus, the dead man’s sister objects, “Oh Lord, he stinketh!”

People in other societies cannot afford contemporary Americans’ discrete disregard for death. In Israel, Palestine and Iraq, children are blown apart by bombs. In Africa, they watch their mothers wither away from AIDS. In North Korea they starve.

The reality is that everything about this mortal life is moving toward dissolution for everyone. I cannot tell you how many times as a pastor I have heard a cancer patient say, “It wasn’t until I realized I was terminal that I learned how to live.” But

we are all terminal. It is just a matter of when someone signs the certificate. Our relationships are also terminal, as are our careers.

You can try to hang onto everything for a while, but what a silly way to live. Either you're going to be worried every day about losing it all or you'll have to pretend you won't die. According to the disciples of Jesus, that's an idle tale.

The disciples knew they couldn't keep the Jesus they had back in Galilee, because he was dead. Back in Galilee the disciples and the women who followed Jesus had nurtured many hopes for what he could do. But all of those hopes died on Good Friday. There comes a time in every disciple's life when she discovers that her hopes for what Jesus will do for her have died on the cross.

Easter won't prevent those losses. But that's good news. Easter isn't the happy chapter in our ongoing effort to hold onto dreams. It isn't the next thing. It's the *new* thing only God can give.

When Luke is finally ready to describe the Easter miracle, he begins with the word "but." The 23rd chapter of Luke ends with Joseph of Arimathea wrapping up Jesus' dead body and placing it in a tomb. "But," begins chapter 24, "on the first day of the week, at dawn, the women came to the tomb and found it empty." But. However. Nevertheless. These are words that signal a sacred intrusion into death. The gospel always turns on a great "however." Luke tells us that the women were "perplexed"—another sign of sacred intrusion. Then they saw two men in dazzling garments and were "terrified"—the Bible's favorite response to sacred intrusions.

The women fell with their faces to the ground. Usually the next line of the Bible is that the angel says, "Fear not," but according to Luke these angels say, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, *but* has risen"(my italics).

To say that Jesus is risen from the dead is not to say he has returned to his earthly life. That was gone. It was dead. To say that Jesus is risen from the dead is to say that God reached into that tomb and into history, lifting Jesus up to new life. And it is to say that God will do the same thing for us.

This is terrifying—in order to receive this new life, we have to stop clinging to the old one. We have to stop looking for the living among the dead. Stop obsessing over the right career move, stop pressuring the kids to be perfect, stop fantasizing about what the latest diet will do for our bodies. It is all going to die anyway, so stop. And

go to the empty tomb, where there is the promise of a new life that will never die.

My grandmother, the one who was comfortable around death, freely accepted her imperfect body. She was a large woman, and didn't care. Since she was free of that anxiety, she could devote herself to things that were eternal, like cherishing God, her family, mission work and fishing. She laughed easily, most of the time at herself, and enjoyed all her days. She was fully alive because she had already given God the life she couldn't keep anyway.