

## Sermon Archive 580

Friday 3 April, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Matthew 27: 57-61

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



It's a hospice not far from here. A woman is sitting next to the bed on which her son lies. Keeping vigil, she's accompanied by one other person who wasn't planning to be present for a death; Death kind of just showed up (having lingered in the corners for years). The room is quiet. The lights are low, and the focus is on the breathing - which by now isn't anything like regular. A couple of breaths, a long gap, another breath, a long gap - was that gap longer, or just the same? It's hard to tell. She won't know the last breath as it happens. It will only be after it happens that she will know that's what it was. No bell will ring. No light will go out. It will just be a vagueness of realisation.

When the realisation has come, she stands, kisses him on the forehead, and says "I love you". She sits down again. The third person sits with her, and hopes that God will give him guidance.

In 1968 the scientists had sought to bring some clarity: when do we say that someone is dead? Because they were based at Harvard University, the criteria were called the Harvard Criteria. It wasn't rocket science - the absence of response to externally applied stimuli, nor reflexes or muscular movement, fixed pupils, no breathing, a flat electroencephalogram, repeat the tests 24 hours later. If hypothermia, barbiturates or extreme youth are not involved, then 24 hours should be sufficient. Death can be said to have come. "I love you" she says, and kisses his forehead.

-ooOoo-

When is someone dead? They talk about a deadness in the eyes, a "going out" of the light. Again, generally the light doesn't go out in a moment. It's more of a gradual dimming (can we see it? Is it our imagination? No maybe today's just a difficult one, and the change in the eyes is more a distraction than a fatal defeat. It'll be all right again tomorrow - and sometimes that true. In fact for some people, the older they get, the more sparkly their eyes, or warm, or knowing, or forgiving. Not every eye dies.

Of course, throughout Lent, we've watched the slow wearing away of his attempts to love the world, so the world might not perish but have eternal life. The resistance of those he called whitewashed tombs. The crimes of the predators against the little ones of God. The crowds refraining from stoning the adulteress only because of public shame. The disciples who never quite understood what love meant, what Messiah meant, what "Son of Man" meant. These are discouragements, the kinds of things that change the eyes of the hard-hoping One. Is he in fact a "dead man walking", even before any official announces it at conviction? Or does death in the eyes get declared only once he himself cries out "My God, why have you forsaken me?" Tell him you love him. Kiss him on the forehead.

-ooOoo-

When is someone dead? It's important for a Roman soldier to know, because if he doesn't know, he won't know that he's completed his task. So it becomes the custom for soldiers to ram a spear through the thorax or abdomen - a kind of primitive Harvard experiment. And in case someone's not quite completely dead yet, the experiment hurries things along - produces that final breath. If it transpires that they hadn't waited quite long enough, maybe they console themselves with the idea of its having become a mercy-killing (speeding up the process of merciless slowness). I don't know. I don't know what goes on in the thinking of Roman soldiers. There are probably soldiers who have nightmares, and soldiers who don't. Go on love, "gizz a kiss".

-ooOoo-

When is someone dead? Because, you know, so long as others still care and remember, so long as others continue the work, so long as the life still inspires and is present through others, are they dead? The power of memory . . .

I park my car in the Knox Church carpark. I take my laptop bag from the floor behind the driver's seat, shut the door, notice that my trouser hem is caught up in the loop at the rear of my shoe (as it always does). Untangling it (so I don't look like I'm not coping with life), I make that tut tutting noise - and immediately smile, since I hear my father. One simple little sound, one realisation that I've become my father, and there he is in my day. For a fleeting moment, it's like it's not *my* day, but *our* day.

While there are other days when I don't think of him, you can't say he's forgotten. As I said at the funeral, "thank you Pa; I'll always be grateful". How do we know that someone is dead? Well, we scattered his ashes in a beautiful place - like a kiss on the forehead, a saying "I love you".

-ooOoo-

When is someone dead? Imagine a small group of people - are they mourners yet? Or just people still in shock? Maybe Harvard should establish some criteria for when we know we're mourners. The small group of people take possession of the body and need to find somewhere to put it. One of them has managed to do some kind of "thinking ahead", so has a tomb - pre-purchasing Joseph. Because they're handling the body, labyrinth-ing towards a tomb, they know he's dead. How do you know? They know.

It is written that once the body had been laid in the tomb, Joseph rolled a great stone across the door, and went away. It's unlikely that Joseph himself rolled the great stone by himself - since later we'll read that no one knew how they would anoint the body once the Sabbath was over, because of the great size of the stone. Indeed, there are some versions of the story that have the Romans very keen to keep the tomb sealed - maybe **they** helped make sure the stone was massive. [Matthew 27: 66]

How do we know that someone is dead? The question finds an answer in the form of a huge, sealed, immoveable stone placed across the door between the living and the dead.

On this side of the stone are those who wish he wasn't dead. On this side of the stone also are those who are glad that he is. There is something awful about the use of a stone to seal him into the realm of the dead. There is something so fittingly eloquent about a world so jumpy that stone is deployed. "Let you who are without sin cast the first stone" he'd said. Well, the world comes up with a really big stone, and has no compunction about rolling it across - **to mark the end of the life of Jesus**. Tell him that you love him? Place a kiss on his forehead? No; roll a stone across, mark him, block him, call him dead.

How do we know that someone is dead? A great, immoveable stone is placed across the door.

**Epilogue**: How heavy is stone?

In our youth . . . maybe a spirit of confidence!  
Yes, we are equal to the dead weight of a stone,  
any stone.  
It's just a matter of putting the shoulder to the wheel,  
the core to the refusal,  
the will to the want.  
Easy for the confident and strong, the young and the not yet so wise . . .

Then we meet real stones.  
Hatred.  
Arrogance.  
A fear that puts on a mask of power,  
and ne'er allows a shaft of light to sliver between the mask and face  
and soul.  
It seems no power to push  
as Jesus had power to push  
saved him from this . . .  
this Good Friday . . . outcome.

He said "put down your stones".  
He said "on this solid rock I will build my church".  
He said "if people fall silent, the stones themselves will sing".  
That's what he said.

And today a huge and horrible stone is used by this world  
to lock him away,  
to rule a line under his life,  
and to say "this amounted to no more than death".

In two days from now, two women will come to do their funeral work.  
They have no idea how they will do it,  
because a huge, big bloody stone is in the way.

And so we end.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.