

Let me tell you about a man well acquainted with death. As a boy, this man lost both his parents before the age of 14. He lived during a war that lasted 30-years long, during which soldiers entered his town and burned down 400 buildings, including his home and church. Not long after this, a plague swept through the same town, killing 300 more people, including his brother.

Despite such a turbulent childhood, this young man became a pastor. After several years, he got married and had five children. Three of those children died in infancy, a fourth child died a little later on, and then finally his wife, heavy-laden by the anxiety and pain of losing her children, also died, leaving behind a six-year-old son with her husband. As if all that didn't seem like too much for any man to bear, in the midst of all of it, he was removed from his office as pastor because he refused to compromise the Word of God and gloss over some differences for the sake of unity.¹

Who is the man who lived this mournful story? He's the same man who wrote the hymn we just sang, "Why Should Cross and Trial Grieve Me?" His name was Paul Gerhardt, the man widely considered to be the greatest of the Lutheran hymn writers. It appears this man's pain allowed him to grasp the beauty and truth of the gospel in a way that no life of ease ever could. Though it's title in our hymnbook sounds sad and somber, that hymn originally appeared in German hymnals with 12 stanzas under a different title, "A Christian's Hymn of Joy".

Joy? You've got to be kidding me? Joy? For him? The man who walked through life with Death hiding around every corner, waiting to take another of his loved ones. If ever there was a man we could hardly blame for sitting down next to Job in misery and bitterness, having suffered the pangs of death, it was Gerhardt. Yet the legacy of the many hymns he has left to us could be characterized by one unexpected almost unbelievable theme. See if you can pick it out from his hymn titles: "Once Again My Heart Rejoices," "Come, Your Hearts and Voices Raising," "Awake My Heart with Gladness," "Rejoice, My Heart Be Glad and Sing." "All My Heart this Night Rejoices".

Joy, Gladness, Rejoicing. How does a man who endured what he endured sing the songs that he sang? One of his contemporaries commented that he lived in "circumstances which would've made most men cry rather than sing." But even now, all these years later, if you asked him how, you could find his answer in the hymn. "Why should cross and trial grieve me? Christ is near, With his cheer; Never will he leave me." He knew the Rock of Refuge to which he could always go and he fled to him when his parents died, and his brother died, and his children died, and when his wife died, and when finally he breathed his last breath and died.

In the face of death, we need to find that refuge from fear and bitterness, and despair or we ourselves will die inside and out with no hope. So the scene is set for the stark way our Gospel lesson today began. A panicked father staring death in the face for his little child comes running to Jesus. He was an upright man, a leader of the synagogue, meaning he took care of the arrangements of their worship services, but he didn't waste any time with formality. **"When he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet. He pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." (Mark 5:22).**

We don't know exactly when or where or with whom this man had started on his journey to find help for his daughter, but he hadn't found it yet and now she was literally "at the end." Finally, he had come to the one who had been displaying his power over every sickness and disease. This had to be the right place, if anyone had a chance to heal her, it had to him. He

¹ <https://www.reformation21.org/blog/paul-gerhardt-and-his-songs-of-confident-hope>

begged him to come! No time to waste. They just needed to get back to this little daughter before she died. **“So Jesus went with him”** (5:24).

Except for one big problem. Traffic was at standstill. People were crowding in on Jesus, just trying to touch him. One particular woman who managed to reach out and touch the clothes of Jesus held up the whole procession as Jesus stopped to find out who it was, as if he didn't know. He had felt power go out from him, and that power had just healed a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. You can just picture Jairus there staring at his watch. “Come on, man! Stick to the itinerary. My daughter is dying!” Then comes the most dreadful news a parent can hear. **“Your daughter is dead.”** (5:35).

Jairus melts into the ground because the apple of his eye, his only daughter, is dead. The agony of grief sets in. Nothing left to say. Nothing more to do. She's gone. That's the way the people who brought the bad news were thinking, **“Why bother the teacher anymore?”** (5:35). She's dead.

They had come to trust the nearly unavoidable rule to which there were only a measly few exceptions in the history of the world: **“To dust you will return”**. The news probably had not spread to them yet that Jesus had recently raised the Widow of Nain's son from the dead. Before that, you had to go back about 800 years to the time of Elijah and Elisha to find the last time the Bible reports anyone being raised from the dead.

But what had loomed large throughout history was an almost uninterrupted string that started in Genesis 5, where Moses records the genealogy of the first families of the earth. “Adam lived 930 years, and **then he died.**” That refrain repeats itself over and over through the rest of the chapter and down through the history of the world, “Then he died, then he died, then he died.” Now death had come for Jairus' daughter at only 12 years of age, and it seemed there was no trifling with it. Death struck again.

But death isn't the end for the Prince of Life. **“Overhearing what they said, Jesus told Jairus, “Don't be afraid; just believe.”** (5:36). So we begin to see Jesus imparting a vastly different perspective from everyone else about death. But Jairus is still going to have to wait for Jesus' purpose and timing to run its course.

He sends everyone away except the three, Peter, James, and John. They arrive at the home where the mourners were wailing and making a commotion. The custom of the day was that there were people hired as professional mourners until the burial took place. Then Jesus walks in with an off-the-wall statement, **“Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.”** (5:39).

Either they thought he was making an unfunny joke or he had a couple screws loose because “they laughed at him.” They ridiculed him because nobody messes with death. It's unwavering and unquenchable. It simply comes for us all. But Jesus is about to start pulling back the veil on a truth that wouldn't be fully revealed until Easter Sunday, a truth about who is truly in charge of the grave and this you can bet on: *it ain't death.*

Standing just the six of them around the girl, father, mother and the 3 disciples, **“Jesus took her by the hand said to her, ‘Talitha koum!’ (which means “Little girl, I say to you, get up!).”** (5:41). One commentator mentions that these were common words her mother might have said to her every morning, “Little girl, get up! It's time for breakfast.” And **“Immediately she stood up and began to walk around,”** one of the most astonishing miracles seen in centuries, raising someone from the dead, and Jesus simply equates it to waking her up from her beauty sleep. That's the One you want by your side as you stare into the face of death- the Rock

of Refuge who will not falter, the one not ruled by death because he is the Resurrection and the Life, and no one who trusts in him will ever truly die.

That's the difference between being in Christ and outside Christ. That's the difference between death being a dreadful end to run from or simply the gate to what comes next. Outside of Christ, physical death is the beginning of eternal death, body and soul barred from the presence of God to suffer eternally without him. Outside of Christ, Death is a sadistic serial killer, a brutal mass murderer bent on the genocide of the nations.

But in Christ the Rock of Refuge, **Death cannot kill.** It can only put to sleep. It cannot kill because it's been robbed of its power. Like a prison with no warden or walls or bars, **“Christ shared our humanity so that he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. (Heb. 2:14)** Or as our second lesson said, **“Christ Jesus has destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” (2 Tim. 1:10).** **Death cannot kill us,** because Christ has put Death to death by his Resurrection. So we are safe in the Refuge of the one who conquered it- Jesus Christ the Living One.

Jairus learned who Jesus was that day and watched with his own eyes as Jesus reversed death with but two simple words. That story is a treasure of our faith, but do you ever catch yourself feeling spiteful about it. “Great for you Jairus, but Jesus, what have you done for me lately?” My grandpa died, and then my aunt, and then my uncle, and then my mom, and then my grandma all in the span of four years at seminary. I know you've lost dear ones as well, old and young, parents and children. Where was Jesus to bring any of them back from the dead?

The answer for every believer in Christ, and I do not say this tritely, is that they never truly died. Their bodies sleep in the dust of the earth no doubt, but their souls **live** awaiting the bodily Resurrection on the Last Day. Remember what Jesus asked Martha at the death of Lazarus her dear brother, **“The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?” “Yes, Lord.” Marth said. (John 11:25,26).** And we answer with the same “yes of faith,” when Jesus commands us, “Don't be afraid. Only believe.”

Humble, simple childlike trust in the Rock of Refuge—that's what Jesus calls for. It seems like a tall order, especially in the face of death. But the gospel gives the trust for which it calls and living in this trust is the only way you can avoid spite and bitterness and fear and anger as you face death. Cling to Jesus the Refuge of the weary and you will live with real joy even while death looms all around. This is how you can carry on in the faith of those who have gone before you, singing Gerhardt's hymns to the very end when all others would simply cry.

Gerhardt died in 1676 with only the one of his five children surviving him. He died knowing that death was but a sleep. His last words were from the 8th verse of this hymn, “A Christian's Hymn of Joy”

Death can never kill us even,
But relief, from all grief, To us then is given.
It doth close life's mournful story,
Make a way, that we may, Pass to heav'nly glory.²

Our times are in your hands Oh Lord, Grant to us also a blessed end. Amen.

We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. Amen.

² Christians Worship Handbook, P. 445.