

Homily in honor of Don Valencia

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Primary Biblical Text: **John 11:25-26**

What then are we to say?
In the face of all of this.
In the face of death.
What are we to say?

Gospel.

We are to say Gospel, good news.
In the face of our loss.
The Bible has good news for us.

Ready?

“Things are not as they seem.”

Don Valencia is not dead.
He is gone.
But he is not dead.

When Don “died” last Saturday, he did not die.
When you, Heather, with your mother, watched Don slip away last Saturday— one moment he was there, the next moment he was gone –when you watched him slip away, he did not die.
He left.
Because Someone came for him.
And Don left with Him.
He had to. No one can resist the Lord of the Universe when He comes.
Don left.
Don is gone.
But he is not dead.

Jesus says to us today what He said to Martha of Bethany.
Martha is the sister of a man named Lazarus of Bethany,
one of Jesus' best friends.
Jesus used to hang out with Lazarus in Bethany's Canlis restaurant.
Lazarus had “died”.

By the time Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had been “dead” four days.

Lazarus had been lying in the tomb four days.

Jesus, looking into the sad face of the grieving Martha, says:

“I am...
I am the resurrection and the life;
he who believes in Me, shall live even if he dies,
And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.
Do you believe this?”

Lazarus had believed in Jesus.

Lazarus had, therefore, begun to live in Jesus.

When Lazarus “died” he did not die.

“He who believes in Me, shall live...even if he dies...
He who lives in Me shall never die”.

Lazarus was gone.
But he was not dead.

Don is gone.
And his absence is painful to bear.
But he is not dead.

Not dead at all!
“Swallowed up by life”, is the way the Apostle Paul puts it.
2 Corinthians 5:4 –
“that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life”.

Why?
Don is gone. But he is not dead. Why?

For one reason, and one alone.
Jesus.
Because of what Jesus has done for Don, and for us.

One day each of us will stand before the Creator.
And on that day, we have two options.
We can take our stand on the basis of what *we* have done with our lives.
Or, we can take our stand on the basis of what *Jesus* has done with *His* life.

Don had long ago decided he would exercise the second option.
So have I.
So have most of you.

Because of what Jesus has done with His life, death does not have the last word.
It only has the second to the last word.
The last word is LIFE.

Jesus gave His life for Don's sins, for my sins, for your sins, for the sin of the world. On a Roman cross, Jesus did what needed to be done about our sin. He did everything (!) that needed to be done about our sin.

"It is finished", was His cry.

It still is. "It is finished.

Everything that needs to be done about your sin, I have done".

And Jesus then conquered the power of death.

Through the empty-tomb, Jesus overcame all that death can throw at us.

Jesus faced death head-on – and beat it!

Jesus went through the grave, into a whole new order of existence.

And turned around to declare to us:

"do not fear...

I was dead, and look! I am alive forever more;

and I hold the keys of death..." (Revelation 1:18).

"Because I live, you shall live also" (John 14:19).

And, having passed through the grave; having conquered death, Jesus now gives His life to those who love Him. He says,

"For just as the Father raises the dead,

and gives them life,

even so the Son gives life to whom He wishes" (John 5:21).

"Gives life".

On the other side of the grave, yes.

But (!) on this side of the grave as well.

Jesus says,

"Whoever believes in Me, *has* eternal life,

and has passed out of death into life" (John 5:24)

Has...now...before we "pass to the over side."

That is why, although Don is gone, he is not dead.

Fifteen ago he fell in love with Jesus.

Fifteen ago Jesus gave His life to Don

I know. I was there.

It was a Sunday morning, a few days before Christmas, December 20, 1992.

Don and Heather had come to visit the church where I was preaching.

{Fremont Presbyterian Church, Sacramento}

They were sitting right in front of me, in the third row.

And as I spoke of Jesus, I saw Jesus giving His life to Don.

Right before my eyes...giving life to Don.

Zoe is the word.

Jesus gave Don Zoe.

You see, the New Testament uses two Greek words translated by the English word "life".

They are Bios and Zoe.

And there is all the difference in the world between them!

Greater than the difference between Biology and Zoology!

Bios is the life we receive from our parents.

A good life.

But a life that slowly runs down, decays.

Bios-life is the life that does die.

Zoe is the life that does not end.

It cannot end.

Zoe is the life God has.

Zoe is the life God lives.

Zoe is the life God IS.

And Zoe-life is the life Jesus gives us before we go through the grave!!

Don is gone. But he is not dead.

Because years ago Jesus gave Don Zoe.

“Even though he dies, he lives...because he has Zoe. I Am the Zoe.”

It is Zoe that we experience in Don.

It is because of the Zoe in Don that we are drawn to him.

It is Zoe that enabled Don to do what he did with his life.

Gone ... but not dead.

In what sense “not dead”?

In what sense is Don presently experiencing this Zoe-Life?

Here we are moving into mystery.

Scripture does not give us a clear, concrete answer.

I suppose in the nature of things, Scripture cannot.

What is clear is this:

Don is not alive in the way he was before last Saturday; he is not alive in his body.

And Don is not alive in the way he will be when Jesus brings in the new heavens and the new earth. Don is not alive in his resurrection body.

In the New Testament book of Hebrews, we are told of men and women of faith who have gone before us: people like Noah, Abraham & Sarah, Moses, Samson, David, Samuel.

At the end of the chapter – Hebrews 11 – the author says that all these people of faith have not yet fully realized the fulfillment of the promise: “for”, he says, “apart from us” they are not yet made perfect (11:40). They are waiting for all the others God is bringing into the new world.

So, Don is not living in the way he did here; and not yet living as he will when we all finally join him.

What *is clear* is that he is with Jesus.

“When I prepare a place for you,

I will come and take you to Myself,

there where I am you may be also” (John 14:3).

The Apostle Paul says, “to be absent from the body”- which is only a temporary state, for we were created for embodied existence –“to be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 4:8).

Don is “at home” with the Lord.
Aware of the Lord.
Captured by the Lord.
Enthralled with the Lord.
Enjoying the Lord.
Free of pain.
Freed of the aging process.
Alive to the Beauty and Goodness of the Savior.
As never before!

Where? Where is Don “at home” with Jesus?

Again, we are passing into mystery.
For the “where?” question leads to the question, “where is Jesus?”
Where is the risen Jesus?

Not far away! Not far away at all.
That much is clear.
He is not in a “far place”.
He is close at hand.
In another dimension of our multi-dimensional universe.
I would love to hear Don talk about this right now!
I would love to hear him put his scientific mind to work telling us about how we live in a universe more magnificent and complex than we imagined!
The Risen Lord is very close at hand. So very close.
Closer than our breathing.

Which is why although we cannot see Him right now, we can know Him and His intimate Presence. He is, right now, on the throne of the universe, even now reigning as King of kings, and Lord of lords.

Where?
Again, not far. Not far at all.
And Don...and my dad, and my grandmother...and your believing loved-ones...are there with Jesus.

Gone...but not dead.

Doing what?
Don is a do-er.
What is Don doing there?

Scripture *does say more about this!*
In addition to enjoying Jesus – and His Father and His Spirit –
Don is rooting for us.

Yes, he might be dancing...as the blog now says.
And probably suggesting ways to better run the universe!
But what is clear from the Bible is that he is rooting for us!

You see, Don is now part of that “great cloud of witnesses” referred to in Hebrews 11. Right after listing names of those who have lived by faith before us, the writer says,
“therefore, since we have so great a cloud
of witnesses surrounding us” (12:1),
let us run the race with endurance.

The author of Hebrews is envisioning us all in a long distance race. And the author envisions us being “cheered on” by those who ran the race before us. As we seek to follow Jesus in this dimension of existence, those in the other dimension – “not far away” – are yelling to us
“keep going”,
“you can do it”,
“fix your eyes on Jesus”,
“keep trusting Him”.

Isn't that wonderful to imagine?

Along with Noah, and Abraham, and Sarah, and Moses, and Deborah, and David, and Peter, and John, and Mary, and Paul, and St. Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas, and Martin Luther, and John Calvin, and Amy Carmichael, and C. S. Lewis, and Karl Barth, Don Valencia is in the stands cheering us on!

If we could hear him right now, I think Don would be saying to us,
“it works...
faith works...
trusting Jesus works...
keep going”

To you Heather, his beloved, I think Don is saying:

“I love you.
You were there for me...all the way...and I love you.
Thank you for forgiving me for not being all I needed to be for you.
Jesus has His hand on you...
He has you by the hand...and He will never let you go.
He has provided for you so richly.
But the provision is not your security for the future.
Jesus is your security for the future.
He will never let you go.”

To each of you, his sons, Johnny and Bo, I think Don is saying:

“I am so proud of you.”
I know your dad is saying that today because every time I was with
him he boasted about you guys.
He is still boasting.

“Lord, do You see my sons?
Aren’t they great guys?”

He is rooting for you:

“Jesus loves you.
More than I ever could.
You can trust Him.
He has great plans for you.
He will never let you go.”

To “the brothers”:

“I couldn’t have done without you.
I love you.
Keep loving each other.
Keep going hard after Jesus.
Keep feasting on Him together.
Love your families.
Give it all for the kingdom of God.
I will keep supporting you from this side.
God is more glorious than we thought!”

Gone.
But not dead.

That is what we have to say today.

Don has begun a new story...for which his life in this world has only been, as C.S. Lewis put it, “the cover and title page.” Don is beginning “Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever; in which every chapter is better than the one before.”

“Things are not as they seem.”

Don Valencia is gone.

But, thank God, Don is not dead.

“I am the resurrection and the life;
whoever believes **in Me**
shall live even if he dies.
“And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.”

(Footnote: the phrase, “gone...but not dead,” I got from remarks Dr. Lewis Smedes made at the funeral of his fellow Fuller Theological Seminary professor, James Morgan, in 1970)