

It's been a significant week at St. Ben's this week. On Thursday we marked the Feast of the Ascension, the day on which the church remembers the resurrected Jesus being mysteriously 'taken up' and into heaven; and yesterday we gathered for a Memorial Service for our beloved brother, Jerry, who died, kinda unexpectedly, early last Monday.

That these two services took place within a couple of days of each other offers us, I think, something to consider.

As Christians, the story arc that's central to our life together is the story of Jesus' life, and Jesus' life story, as it's told in the Gospel texts, really is centered on his death – the stories of his ministry, his healing and teaching life among us, always moving toward and anticipating his death that's to come, and then telling of what happened after he died, and then the final climactic movement, from resurrection to ascension.

Death and life, both, are at the heart of the Christian understanding of God, of our reason for being, the purpose of our existence. Not death alone, not this life alone, but death and life, always bound together, inseparable, enmeshed in both reality and meaning. So, if we're to make meaning of our time here, in this life, we're called, also, to think deeply about death.

There's a lot of theology rattling around the church about what Jesus' death was *for*, what it might have *accomplished*, ideas we can put to work to nicely explain why Jesus's story had to be the story that it is.

But theology has an annoying habit of tidying it all up, getting it all figured out for us. But any theology, any ideas about God, that are detached from lived, human experience will make no difference to how we feel, who we feel we are, or how we live.

We might repeat the story arc of Jesus' life each time we gather and say one of the creeds, for example, but these statements of faith, these theological assertions, need us to make meaning from them for us to reveal the power behind the words. Simply affirming that Jesus died, rose again, and then ascended into heaven doesn't, by itself, do anything to transform our lives or the world.

The truths of Jesus' story aren't for us to 'know' by affirmation, they're for us to understand through participation.

Before coming back to the church, I thought it was only the religions of other cultures that took the spiritual life seriously. I assumed, because of the statements of faith and the tidy theologies of the church, that Christianity was 'simple,' essentially a done deal, Jesus came and sorted it all out for us, all we need really 'do' is get baptized and show up for church to be saved.

Decades of my life would pass before I discovered that Christianity, Jesus' Way, is rich with spiritual depth and possibility, and an entire way of living – far from being a tidy, done-deal, Jesus' Way calls for a whole, committed life, together, of prayer, of immersion in Scripture, and for a rhythm of life centered on spiritual practice and discipline.

This is the life Jesus led, and it's this life that Jesus calls us into, because it's hard in this world to keep the truth and reality of God always before us, surrounded as we are by the pressures and temptations of a world that exists for entirely different reasons.

Jesus doesn't promise there will be no discomfort or pain, that there will be no suffering, but Jesus does promise that his Way is a way of healing, and restoration, and freedom. Jesus' Way is a way of transformation of being.

Along the way, as Church, and in our own lives, we spiral around, over and over, year after year, from life to death and back again. In the church, as we retell Jesus's story each year, and, with far less predictability, in our own lives. Births and deaths, beginnings and endings, the truth of death always in the midst of life, and life always arising from death.

Any deepening understanding of all this will be the fruit of our lives as Jesus' disciples. The wisdoms we begin to embody, the knowings and the trusts that will develop within us, will become part of who we are as we continue in our walk with Jesus, in love, by faith.

But this is a culture that has a preference for tidy thought efficiently reached by rational thinking. There's no end of stuff we can read and take onboard from the way others have made sense of it all; but there's no short-cut in this spiritual life. For us to enter into a fuller relationship with life and death, we need to explore and engage and imagine for ourselves. Otherwise, as people of this culture, we might, in our discomfort, push thoughts of death away in fear, and wait, instead, until we have to deal with it.

And we will have to deal with it, because death is inseparable from life. The ones we love die. We face the truth of our own death. And, as we all know only too well, when we lose a loved one, or when we face tough truths about our own limited existence, pain can creep in and threaten to overwhelm us, fear can grip our heart and mind.

We can believe we just need to work through these feelings, or get past them – but I wonder if the Church's focus on the death of Jesus isn't telling us that, instead, we need to learn how to make death a companion.

We can't tidy death up, or ignore it, it will resist both at every turn; it's part of life and our experience of it, our response to it, is uniquely personal and a part of who we are and how we live.

I truly believe that one of the most critical calls of this Christian life is to get free from the grip that death can have on us, the way it can dominate and distort our lives. I truly believe that the story arc of Jesus' life teaches us that death should not be the terrorizing tyrant it is for so many of us, death needs instead be accepted as the constant companion in life that it is.

As we deepen our relationship with God, and as our trust in that relationship expands and becomes within us, the fear and the suffering that can accompany death likely won't go away entirely (we're human after all), but it need not dominate or terrify. And if fear's no longer the boss of our lives, we can begin a new relationship with death and can embody an ever-deepening trust that it is not the end.

We can "know" that knowing God is eternal life, as Jesus says in today's Gospel, we can also "know" that Jesus died, was resurrected, and ascended, but apart from the spiritual path, apart from living Jesus' Way: living lives shaped by love, prayer, trust, and practice – this knowledge may never reach our hearts, and these truths may never transform our lives or set us free from death's grip.

The Ascension of Jesus affirms and assures that the final movement of the human life isn't disappearance into nothingness, but deeper union with the eternal life of God.

That might be what we “know” - but what that means, for us in our own lives, how it transforms us, how it transforms our relationship with death, that’s for each of us, alone and together, to figure out as we follow Jesus on the Way.