

Memorial Service: Michael D. Bush  
Oct. 27, 2017  
Pisgah Presbyterian Church, Versailles, KY

John 11:17-26

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None of us expected to be here today. It is hard to imagine we are here and what has brought us together. It does not seem real. But here we are.

Throughout the last four days, I have received dozens of calls and emails from friends from all over the country who have expressed their shock and disbelief at what has happened. Hundreds of messages have appeared on social media expressing grief and sorrow, but also gratitude for the life we have just lost.

Michael David Bush touched the lives of thousands of people through his ministry of preaching, teaching, and writing. Many had the enormous privilege of having him as a pastor, a teacher, and friend. And, of course, for those who knew him as a son, a brother, a husband, and a father, we can hardly imagine how painful and bewildering this day must be for you.

He meant so much to so many of us. We have so many wonderful memories of this man. He touched our lives so deeply and in so many ways. For many of us the flow of memories simply will not stop. And I doubt they ever will. He was, as many of you know, like a brother to me. And there are so many things I would like to tell you about him by way of celebrating the gift of his life.

But I was also his colleague. I worked alongside him *professionally*, as pastor and teacher and fellow-soldier. Therefore, I know what he would have wanted to happen today. I know all too well. And you former students and colleagues gathered here know exactly what he would have expected as well. He would have wanted this service to be not primarily about him, but about God.

Good, decent, and in order Presbyterian and Reformed theologian that he was, he would have expected a text and an interpretation, readings from the Scriptures and a sermon because this is where our true comfort comes. It comes from the Word of God illumined by the Holy Spirit. So he would have said: “No

eulogizing, no pious plattitudes, no flood of personal reminicences, no fooling around, but the service should focus primarily on the words of Scripture followed by a sincere effort to interpret them to the glory of God in thanks for the gift of the life of a particular person.” That’s what he believed. That’s what he taught. And that’s what he did.

So here’s the text: John 11: 17-26:

*Now when Jesus came, he found that Laz'arus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary sat in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. And even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"*

Did Jesus really have to add that? Did He really have to add the question, “*Do you believe this?*” Was it really necessary? Did He really have to press Martha on this point, especially when she was obviously in such a profound state of grief? I suppose it’s one thing to initiate this type of discussion, but it seems quite another to elicit a definite response from someone who is grieving, especially regarding what most would consider such a highly abstract, esoteric theological point. This is certainly not what they teach you to do in seminary and it’s not what most books on pastoral care and grief counseling tell you to do, either. It’s considered inappropriate. You don’t put these sorts of questions to people when they’re in mourning! Yet this is precisely what Jesus does.

Why did He do it? Well, it's not because He was *insensitive* or because He wanted to set yet another person *straight*, theologically, or because He cared more about *ideas* than about *people*. No, on the contrary, only a few verses earlier, it says, "*Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.*"

Jesus loved Martha and He knew what she was facing. He knew the pain, the shock, the horror, the disgust, and the anger people have when they experience the loss of a loved one too soon and face the reality of death.

Jesus knew this because only a few verses later when He approached the tomb where Lazarus lay, it says, "*Jesus wept.*" That's what many of us have been doing these last days and will do again. And that's the appropriate response, according to Scripture.

You may have noticed that the Bible never romanticizes death as pagans do. It never claims we are to 'welcome' death as some sort of 'friend' or as if it were really not so bad or ugly after all. Plato called the death of Socrates "beautiful." But that's not how the Bible describes death. When Jesus approached the tomb of his friend Lazarus, it says he wept. "*Jesus wept*" because death is *not* beautiful. It's ugly. It's horrible because it separates us from those we love. That's why the Bible calls death "*the last enemy.*" And that's why Jesus came. He came to defeat sin and death by suffering and allowing himself to be crucified on the cross for our sake, and by rising from the dead, so that we might have eternal life and fellowship with him and with those we love. This is our hope.

Yet it appears that in some sense Martha shared this hope as well because when Jesus said, "*Your brother will rise again,*" she responded: "*I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.*" But this was obviously not good enough for Jesus. That's why He presses the point. Martha did not understand the full significance of the resurrection. She believed "*in the resurrection of the last day,*" which is right and good and our hope. *But she did not really understand the true source and power of the resurrection* and that it's not only something we have to wait for, but it's something we can know and experience *here and now*. That's

why “*Jesus said I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?*”

We who believe in Jesus Christ look forward to the resurrection of our bodies and the bodies of our loved ones and having fellowship with them again. That is our hope and without it we are people most to be pitied, Paul says. But believing that Jesus Christ is “*the resurrection and the life*” means living “*in the power of the resurrection,*” to use Paul’s phrase, *which begins not simply then and there, but here and now.*

Do you believe this?

Michael Bush believed this. That’s why he was so driven, so passionate, so fearless, so full of life and vigor. That’s why he cared so much about the Church, about the Bible, about preaching, about teaching, about worship, about theology, about things many people often don’t understand these days, even many ministers don’t often understand, even though most ministers used to understand that they ought to be concerned about such things.

At his installation service earlier this month, you may recall I interjected a “brief personal word” about Michael (without asking his permission, which I doubt I would have received, which is why I did not ask). And since, according to his own standards, such a service today is to be about “the glory of God in thanks for the gift of the life of a *particular person,*” let me say what most of you by now probably already know: Michael was an enormously skilled, dedicated, and courageous servant of our Lord who gave his all for the sake of Jesus Christ and His Church. He was here only four months, but what a sight it was to behold, was it not?

So many of you have told me how utterly devastating the loss of such a faithful and dedicated shepherd is to you and this congregation. I can certainly understand why. But I want thank you, the congregation of Pisgah Presbyterian Church, for calling Michael Bush to be your pastor. I want to thank you for your

wisdom and your courage. Truth be told, there are not many congregations who truly want a minister of the Word these days. There some who say or think they do, but they often don't. What many would prefer is a schmoozer. But you didn't get a schmoozer. You got a true minister of the Word and I thank you. As most of you discovered, Michael meant business. He was 'all in' and didn't mess around. But I hope he was here long enough for all of you to appreciate what a joy and delight it was to live and work with him. He was an awful lot of fun to be around.

You have witnessed a true minister of the Word pour out his life for the sake of Jesus Christ and His Church. This is a precious gift of God to you. And I pray the Lord will honor the wisdom and courage you showed in calling a faithful shepherd like Michael. But please know that the One True and Great Shepherd of this flock has promised never to leave us or forsake us and He said: "*My sheep know my voice.*"

There is one thing I must mention, however. Very few of you know this about Michael because he was so modest. Yet it really isn't *about* Michael, but *about God*, something Michael discovered about *God*, about the *Gospel*. Michael edited a book of sermons in 2006 entitled, *This Incomplete One: Words Occasioned by the Death of a Young Person*. It's a remarkable collection of sermons by a highly select group of ministers and theologians "*Occasioned*," as the subtitle says, "*by the Death of a Young Person.*" It has been a help to many people who have lost children, friends, or loved ones at a young age, which means I'll have to read it again because it will mean something quite different to me now.

But as soon as I was able to stand up on Monday, I reached for it. And I turned to the "Editor's Introduction," and here's what the first two paragraphs say:

The first task of an editor, I have read, is to tell readers what they have in their hands. Such telling this instance can only be warning: You have pain in your hands. You also are holding onto hope, but never is this hope exuberant. It is quiet, while the pain is loud.

To the preacher who must address the word of God to a congregation gathered around a small or young absence, words feel stupid and clumsy, and yet something must be said. This is a collection of a few of the less clumsy things that have been said on such occasions. The truth is that to feel words to be weak is, in Christian faith, an incursion of doubt. (When young people die there are many of these.) In every moment, however desperate, we can say with the Gospel of John that the Word is with God and is God both in eternity and in flesh, living among us. It is not crucial to know what, precisely, this means. But it points to someone who was God living a human life, who died young and then showed that God thinks dying young, or dying old for that matter, is not the last word on life. It may not seem to be much, but in truth such a word is more than you might have dreamed. We shall have to trust God ...

Michael D. Bush, *This Incomplete One: Words Occasioned by the Death of a Young Person* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), xiii-xiv.

Brothers and sisters, God not only took on human flesh, but He lived a human life and died a human death, and He rose from the dead for a reason. We'll never understand fully this side of eternity what happened on Good Friday or what happened on Monday. But death is not the last word. And Jesus Christ tells us today and forever: "*I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.*"

Knowing that Jesus Christ is "*the resurrection and the life*" changes everything. It changes not only the way we face death, but the way we face life.

It means we can live fully and without fear, fear of anything or anyone.

It means, as Paul says, "*If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord*" (Rom. 14:8).

It means, as the Heidelberg Catechism says, we can face the future—not

cowering in fear, but—“*with our heads erect.*”

It doesn't mean, however, that we won't do so without tears or that we can do it alone. We are going to need each other.

Yet the Heidelberg Catechism teaches we're going to have to be clear about one thing from the start. We're going to be clear about where our true comfort comes from. As many of you know, the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism address this very concern when it asks: “*What is your only comfort, in life and death?*” And so, if you are able, I would ask you to conclude this sermon by responding to this question by reciting the answer, which is printed in your bulletin:

*Question #1 What is your only comfort, in life and death?*

*Answer: That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.*

Beloved, “*The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still, His Kingdom is forever.*” Amen.

Prayer of Thanksgiving  
Michael David Bush

Lord God Almighty, Lover of our souls, whose mercy is from everlasting to everlasting and whose understanding knows no limit, we come before You thanking You for the life of Your servant Michael David Bush. We thank You for his life which was precious not only to those gathered here this day, but precious—ininitely more precious—to You. We thank You for the 53 years You gave him, years of hard work, productivity, and accomplishment. We thank You for the many years of happiness You gave him, and we thank You for Your hidden grace which sustained him through difficult times as well.

We thank You for Michael's many friends, many who are gathered here today and many more who are not. We know how much they will miss him, how much we all will miss him. We thank You for the lives he touched, for people we know and people we will never know.

O God, there is so much we have to thank You for when we think of Michael. We thank you for his extraordinary gifts, which he used so selflessly and sacrificially for others and for the sake of Your Kingdom. We thank You for the many gifts and talents You gave him and for his faithful use of them. We thank You for his brilliant mind, his passion for learning, his zeal to know the truth about You and so many things about this world.

We thank You for his love and commitment to Your church, for his tirelessness in helping pastors in trouble, for the time he gave so freely in helping them find solutions to their problems and answers to their many, many questions. We thank You for his extraordinary patience and willingness to be available to so many of us. We thank You for his encouragement, his confidence in Your grace, and his willingness to serve.

We thank You for Micheal's love of life and his enjoyment of the good gifts of creation, which he never let any of us forget. We thank You for his love of music, cooking, and Kentucky basketball. We thank You for so many little things of life he enjoyed and for the little things we enjoyed about him and the many, many things we learned from him.

Lord, we cannot sum up—we cannot begin to sum up—what he meant to us. We simply thank You for the great gift and privilege of having known him.

We also thank You for the things that were closest to his heart. We thank You for his family whom he loved so dearly. We thank You for his three children, his sons, David and John Peyton, and his daughter, Sara Jane, and her husband, Nathan. We thank You for Janellyn whom he loved and cherished as his own body for nearly 30 years. Lord, we pray that You will comfort them and remind them of Your promise and Your blessing which extends from generation to generation upon those who fear and honor You. Father, comfort them and be, as You have promised, "*a husband to the widow, and a father to the fatherless.*"

We would also thank You for other family members here, and especially for Michael's mother and father and sister whose grief is beyond words. Lord, bless this entire family in the days and weeks to come. Give them strength to endure and precious memories to cherish.

In the fog of grief we are now in, would You please comfort and strengthen us? Would You please help us rest in Your promises and the strength of Your everlasting arms? Grant us the assurance of that place where pain shall be no more, where tears shall be wiped away from every eye, and where death shall be no more. Help us to know that deeper than the pain and mystery of death is Your tender love and mercy. And may we exemplify the good qualities of this dear man, this dear son, brother, husband, father, and friend, and may our Saviour Jesus Christ, in whom there is life abundant and eternal, be our Guide forever, for we pray in the name of Him who taught us to pray, saying, "*Our Father ...*"