

Isaiah 43:1-7

Matthew 5:1-10

Romans 8:31-35, 37-39

I want to begin by thanking First Presbyterian  
and the good folks of this congregation,  
and their pastor,  
for hosting the Celebration of Life  
ceremony today.

It's clear we made the right decision  
because all of us could not  
have fit into St. Stephen.

What a tribute to a great man and servant of God.

Thank you to everyone here and  
to those who worship from afar and are with us  
in the live stream.

What a gift to have St. Stephen and First uniting together.

Emory is truly smiling! (Pause)

It is at times like these that  
we find ourselves on a hill, all alone,  
down on our knees, and our eyes brimming  
with tears.

Times like these when  
our hands are fervently clasped or  
maybe even pulling on our clothes  
as their seams stretch and pop under

the strain of grief.

Times like this, on that hill where we find ourselves alone,  
those of us who are Christian,  
(the kind that actually follows Jesus!)  
look up and gaze  
at a cross, in these times.

And we notice that the image changes,  
or even transforms, because sometimes  
Jesus is there on that cross and other times,  
that cross, well that cross is empty.

When Jesus is present,  
we are wrapped up in  
the grief of death.

The pain of loss is palpable,  
the finality of death glaring, it shuts us down,  
as the lifeless body of Christ is hanged.

Because the sight of it is too hard to take in.

That's what it is like right now for most,  
if not all, of us.

Even though Emory,  
in front of our very eyes, was  
declining over the last few years,  
it still seems too hard to believe a person  
with so much energy,

so much love, and positivity,  
is now gone from our sight.

The lessons from the Bible and all the hymns today  
were selected by Emory for us to read and  
sing on this day when we gather together  
and celebrate his life.

I try to let the words from Isaiah sink in,  
“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you.

When you pass through the waters,  
I’ll be with you;

the rivers won’t overwhelm you;  
you shall not be burned nor  
consumed by the flame.”

We try to focus on that beatitude that said:  
Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they shall be comforted.

It helps to hear the words,  
“nothing can separate us from the love of God,”  
but to be honest, separation of death is all we  
feel when death tightens its grip.

The body of Christ hangs lifeless on the cross. (Pause)

But then there are other times, other times when  
we look at the cross, and even in

the midst of despair, cloudiness,  
separation and pain... we behold...  
the cross is empty.

The implement of death is empty and  
no longer holds Christ and then  
another deeper emotion begins to come up  
from our gut.

There's some sense of knowledge that there's  
a presence in our midst,  
that even in our cries of anguish,  
a friend is with us.

This friend is right next to us,  
it's everyone in this room and beyond this place,  
the people who couldn't be here today.

They weep with us and we with them  
at the loss of our dear Emory.

They are right next to you and me.

Just like the way the empty cross reminds us  
that Jesus is resurrected...  
we are reminded that death could not hold him.

And then we may know that Christ is  
right there with us, too.

What a friend we have in Jesus... (Pause)

It reminds me of Jesus and his friend Lazarus.

Not only a friend but a friend  
who loved his friend.

Isn't it something that this  
Son of Humanity loved Lazarus?

A love that was so great that he wept in  
the presence of his own grief,  
and in the midst of other people's,  
grief.

The deepest emotion couldn't be suppressed  
by the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

Like the way we may picture ourselves on a hill,  
we glimpse the Son of Man throwing  
his head back in anguish that his friend  
was dead. (Pause)

And he cried about it.

Our culture want us to believe that tears are  
a sign of weakness, but they're really signs of  
deep strength.

They make us the most real.

The Lazarus account wants us to know

that Jesus cried (and to remember it that way)  
because we cry when friends we love die.

Period.

I didn't know Pastor Emory as long as  
many of you knew him.

We met about 13 years ago while I was pastoring  
a congregation in Panama City.

We'd often host the panhandle conference  
meetings there since it's a pretty good  
midpoint between Tallahassee and Pensacola.

At those meetings Emory was over a decade  
into his retirement,  
but he still had work to do.

He got the Crop Walk going in Panama City.

A fundraiser walk that helped to feed the hungry.

And boy, did that man loved to walk.

Later, when I was called to pastor St. Stephen,  
I'd often see Emory walking around town  
while I drove in a car.

I remember marveling at his determined  
and purpose-filled stride.

A man who had a job to do and  
places to be and he wasn't afraid  
to walk there. (Pause)

Another mentor told me once that when pastors  
put on the stole over the shoulders,  
they should be reminded of the way  
we "put on Jesus."

Emory put on Jesus in ways that made you  
understand that you were, are, and will always  
be loved by God.

Emory had a way of making each of us  
better followers of Jesus, more aware,  
and more loving, more open to divest our  
addiction to stuff.

He walked in the Way of Jesus;  
with humility, patience,  
love, and sacrifice.

He lived in places where Jesus dwelled.

He lived among the suffering and the marginalized.

He did it until he was so tied up with a disease  
that he got to the point where he knew  
what he wanted to say up here,  
but couldn't get the words to come out here.

In that way he was a lot like Lazarus  
who was tied up with bands of cloth.

We know how binding a disease like dementia is.

It robs our loved ones of memory,  
self-identity, livelihood, and  
finally, it robs them of life itself.

How wonderful it was when Jesus'  
spoke quietly the words,

“Untie him and set him free.”

Never truer are these words now meant for Emory.

The love of a friend is stronger than death.

The love of Jesus is stronger than a tomb.

The cross is empty and  
Emory is set free.

Let him go... Let him go.

Still, for us, we are left  
with an empty tomb.

And sometimes there will be tears when all  
we see is a body on a cross, but let us try

to remember what  
Emory would say.

He'd say, "God loves you warts and all!"

He'd say "I'm gone, but still living in your heart."

He'd say, "Live simpler lives, and divest yourself  
from all that stuff."

He'd say, "Come back to community and  
civil rights and peacemaking."

He'd say, "Get out and go for a walk and  
meet someone new."

You still have life to be lived and you're deeply needed.  
(Pause)

It's no surprise that as I go back to review  
the Bible lessons that Emory wanted us to read  
at this service I notice here

he's selected a portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

Powerful images of the meek inheriting the earth,  
the people who hunger and thirst for justice  
are being filled,

the merciful receive mercy,  
the peacemakers are called children of God,

and the pure in heart... see God.

Would Pastor Emory see himself in  
receiving these blessings?

No way, he was far too humble for that.

I think he had a different reason for these great lessons.

He selected these verses to remind us  
that we still have work to do and  
places to walk.

We celebrate today his freedom.

He is untied and set free.

We celebrate his life with us on earth  
and the eternal life he's now dwelling in.

And we say, "So long for now, good friend.  
So long for now."

At the same time, Jesus said.

"Welcome home, friend.  
Well done, come  
you that are spoken well of by God,  
inherit the place prepared for you."

AMEN!