

Sermon – Matthew 9:18-26  
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Grace Lutheran Church  
Bach Cantata Vespers  
1 Lent – Year A  
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“Fleeting. Futile. Funny?”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. One of the great joys of serving as senior pastor at Grace is putting together the roster of homilists each year for Bach Cantata Vespers. I love that I get to invite such gifted, faithful, inspiring preachers into this storied pulpit, and that together we get to sit at their feet as they proclaim the gospel each month. So, I want to say a word of thanks: Thank you, me, for inviting me to be here today. Truly, I am truly humbled by my generous invitation. Who says a little bit of laughter isn't okay, even during Lent? And truly, so good to be with all of you, and all of our musicians, including today members of Grace's 5-8 grade choir.
2. Laughter is at the heart of today's gospel reading. Surprising, perhaps, considering the fleeting and futility which Bach takes up as his theme. Then again, the laughter is hardly joyful. Not at first, anyway. It is the bitter, mocking laughter of those who know better. Those who know through hard-won experience that life is fleeting and futile. Those who know that some people are beyond help and that death is as irreversible as it is certain. A dead girl only sleeping? How else to respond to Jesus except by laughing at him?
3. An interruption: We see life's futility etched in the lines of suffering on the face of this woman. Twelve years she has suffered. The double pain of her

hemorrhaging and of being separated from community. Her life goes on (and we can't speak to her interiority), but it is perhaps little more than time passing, empty of the peace that comes with good health or the joy that comes with community. Who else but one in such a position would be desperate enough to reach out to this rabbi whose fame has begun to spread throughout the region? She's tried everything else, no doubt, but refuses to be reduced to her condition. She has no time left for the world's wisdom that tells her such things are impossible. Out of her futility emerges faith. This Jesus can make her well. And in her grasping, her futility is erased while health and connection – with Christ and community – rush in. Futility flees from Christ, and this woman receives not simply more, but more with meaning.

4. We see life's fleeting nature in the now-cold form of the religious leader's daughter. Jairus, as his name is given elsewhere, has lived long enough to see what no parent should have to witness: the death of a child. This little girl, perhaps twelve years old, held so much promise for the future. But the world is cruel, and fate is a fickle master. How fleeting, indeed. With a desperation born of grief, he asks Jesus to do the impossible. Jesus can restore this girl to life, and Jesus does exactly that, never mind the jeering mourners outside the door. What once was fleeting is taken up into the eternity of God where nothing is left. Matthew doesn't bother to name these two women, but surely Jesus knew their names. They are not lost to God; Christ has restored them. Fleetingness flees before Christ.
  
5. We spend so much time and energy trying to infuse our futility with utility, to outrun the reality of our mortality. We block our calendars with color-coded commitments – or I do, at any rate – and this hyper busyness creates the illusion of endless time as we run from one thing to the next to the next. Bach picks up on this theme at the outset of the cantata. Well, perhaps not the theme of color-coded calendars, but that of our attempts to fill and extend

- time. Before the singers open their mouths, the music pushes us, rushes us forward, propelling us from one thing to the next, only to remind us how futile and fleeting it all is. Eventually time catches up to us. To all of us.
6. I don't know if any of you have been watching HBO's current series, *The Last of Us*. Maybe stories set in a postapocalyptic nightmare infested with zombie-like creatures aren't your cup of tea. Honestly, they're not normally my cup of tea, either, but the show is filled with characters both well and lovingly crafted, seeking connection and hope in a hopeless land; it's become appointment viewing for me. At one point in episode five, two of the younger characters are delighting in an old comic book they've come across, while two older characters scoff, wondering what the kids see it in. The mantra from the comic book in question is "Endure and survive," which seems exciting to the kids but depressing to the adults. For one thing, they point out to each other, it's redundant. But you also get the sense that these men fear that this is what they've been reduced to, hard day after hard day of enduring and surviving as an end in itself. We live in a world that is radically different from the world depicted in this show, but perhaps not as different as we might imagine. Is our goal only to endure until we can't, to survive until we don't? Fleeting futility, one foot after another, until we walk right into our graves?
  7. Jesus' clear answer to this question is *No*. Seeing this woman's futile, fragmented life, Jesus responds to her faithful initiative with healing, wholeness, and hope. Seeing this girl's fleeting fate, Jesus responds by reaching out his hand, standing her up, and restoring her not just to life, but to the unending story of God and God's people. Endure and survive? No. Stand up and live, free of all that binds you, even the fear of death itself. For in Christ, death has been defeated. We are not already walking into our graves. In Christ, we are already walking out of them, blinking in the brilliant light of Easter that even now shines its rays into our world.

8. In the closing chorale, the words continue to paint a bleak picture, but the music is suddenly spacious, capacious, holding out hope for something more. And not simply more of the same. Not more time before the end, but time now without end. Not life without death, but life beyond death into God's forever. Yes, all things must fall down and pass away, but at the very close, the chorale reminds us that the joke has been on death all along. Bach delivers the punchline: "Whoever fears God, stands forever." Reach out your hand and touch the cloak of Christ. In his blood there is life. Feel his life-giving hand close upon your own. Stand up into the life of the resurrection. Breathe, taking into your lungs the life of the Holy Spirit. And let it out with a laugh. Not the bitter laughter of this weary world, but the joyful laughter of the reign of God, in which sickness, pain, and death are no more. In which lost children are found and restored forever. In which Christ will be all in all, and all in Christ shall rejoice. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.