

Memorial Service Sermon – F. Dean Lueking
 Luke 24:13-35; Ephesians 4:11-16
 David R. Lyle
 Grace Lutheran Church
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“Grace”

Beverly; Ann, Chris, Sarah, Joel; grandchildren and great-grandchildren; friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Eleven years ago, Erika and I made our first trip to River Forest. The occasion was a twenty-four-hour whirlwind in-person interview. Grace and I were in the mutual process of discerning if the Holy Spirit might be calling us together as pastor and people. Having grown up in a different neck of the Lutheran woods, I had been unfamiliar with Grace Church until the call process began. I had never heard the name Dean Lueking in my life. But on my way out the door that morning, someone put a copy of one of Pastor Lueking's books into my hands. Settling into my seat on the plane, I cracked open *The Grace of It All*. I inhaled the words, page after page, and had finished the book just prior to landing. I looked over at Erika and said, “I think this guy is kind of a big deal.” It is an odd thing to begin a friendship with someone through one of their books, but there was more to come. Grace had had good luck in the past calling young guys whose initials are “DL,” and was willing to take the chance again. I’ve been blessed to be at Grace ever since. Knowing Dean, as colleague and friend and pastor, it a big part of that blessing. Dean *is* a big deal, and we could tell story after story about just why that is. And telling these stories is right and good. But Dean, of course, pastor and preacher that he was, would not have wanted the focus to linger on him for too long. Because Dean's story is bigger than Dean. It's bigger even than this place called Grace. It is the story of God's people, caught up in the grace

of our God; grace freely given through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

2. In addition to the scripture that has already been proclaimed today, passages chosen for us by Dean, he left one more. A passage on which to center this sermon, because it stood at the center of his ministry here for forty-four years. St. Paul writes to the Ephesians: “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth building itself up in love.” And there it is. The pastor just one of many. The equipping of the saints – all of them! – as the goal. The whole body working together. And all for the sake of Jesus Christ. Pastor Lueking understood what is easy to forget. The pastor’s ministry is not about the pastor. It is about Jesus, and it is about the people, drawing them together in the rhythms of Word and sacrament, confession and forgiveness, consolation and service and mutual love. At this, Pastor Lueking excelled.

3. Today, after 98 years of life, 71 years of ordained ministry, and nearly 68 years of marriage, we gather in this sacred space to commend Dean into God’s care. Here in this place, where the gospel came to life in Dean’s words. Where hospitality means welcoming all and faithfulness means breaking out of old ways of being church and catching up to the new thing that God is doing. Where Dean helped us know that the baptismal calling to work for

justice and peace meant working for all of our neighbors. For civil rights and for peace when the world screamed war. For interfaith relationships, especially those with our Jewish neighbors. For the marginalized and those in need. For our LGBTQ siblings, for whose cause – and with great love – Dean became a champion. What Dean preached at Grace began at home, born out of a love story that moved quickly from a blind first date to a marriage proposal. Dean was no fool, and he wasn't going to let you get away, Beverly. Together, your home was a place of grace, too. A home for your children and your many foster children. Shoot, there I go, talking about Dean again! Except it's not about Dean. It's about who Dean helped us to be, how Dean shaped us for the life of the cruciform gospel. And all we shared together. So, gathered here today, in the wake of Dean's death, where are we to go, and what are we say?

4. This morning, we join Cleopas and the other disciple on their long walk back to Emmaus. They had had such high hopes, believing that their friend, their rabbi, Jesus, might be the one to restore their people. But the powers that be did what the powers that be tend to do. They took this preacher of love, this proclaimer of forgiveness, this One who claimed to be God's Son, and they crucified him. And that was that. The disciples *had* hoped, but they knew the score. Death is death and that is that. Or, at least, it was. But the stranger who joins them on their sad, lonely road is the resurrected victim. With their own eyes, they cannot yet perceive this new thing. But then, a meal. Bread, and a blessing. Just then, just there, are their eyes opened. Jesus, broken open for their sins, is now the One who breaks open the tomb and brings life out of death. Life, in its abundant and unending grace. We are brought to the table again today, and our eyes are opened. We gather around this table, and receive again the gifts of Jesus Christ, given and shed for you and for the forgiveness of sins. We gather around tables at lunch and experience the power of the mutual consolation of the saints. We are reminded of the grace that begins at home, with family and friends, around our own kitchen tables,

where our quotidian cares and the wounds of strife and conflict can be set aside. We discover, with Cleopas and with Dean, the most amazing truth of all. When the newsman Jim Lehrer once asked Dean what he believed and taught about death, Dean gave him a five-word answer: “Death is a conquered enemy.” It is the most surprising thing of all, but it is true: Death has been swallowed up in the victory of God. Come, see, taste, and know that the Lord is good. So good, in fact, that death no longer gets the last word. In the promise of life, Dean is exactly where he has always been – in the hands of the God who created, redeemed, and loves him. And that, friends, is where you are, too. Gathered around the table, we are not so far away from the saints after all.

5. Last week, I was in Martin, Slovakia, with twenty-six other members of the Grace community. The seeds of this relationship were, of course, planted and nourished by Dean and Beverly. I spoke with the executive director, Bohdan, who was once a young man with a dream but in need of wisdom and direction. After years in which the church was not allowed to freely gather under communist rule, Bohdan and his friends were glimpsing a new vision. But how to move forward? It was Dean, wise from his years of faithful struggle and now sharing his gifts with people around the world, who helped light the way. With friendship, encouragement, and prayer, like a “second father.” As we lamented Dean’s death, Bohdan looked at me and said, “I guess it’s our turn now.” He was drawing, in a way, on Paul’s message to the Philippians, which Dean knew so well. The message that the gospel wasn’t about them; rather, the gospel points us to Jesus. How do we go on without those who came before us? By emulating them, living out what they taught us. By doing those things that are true and honorable, just and pure, pleasing and commendable and excellent. By doing these things in joy and with love for the sake of Jesus. Christ. The very last thing Dean would have us do today is imagine that this story is winding down. I can hear his voice: “Do the next thing.” And the next thing, in one way or another, is always to point to Jesus.

To proclaim forgiveness. To welcome others. To be people of grace. To announce the victory of the resurrection. I was reminded recently of the joy Dean found on the waters around Detroit Island, a place where so many relationships were nurtured. Up until a few years ago, Dean could be found not only in the boat but at the helm, steering the craft forward, calm even when the water wasn't. We follow still in his wake, onto the next thing for Jesus' sake, rejoicing in the boundless sea of grace.

6. It is, of course, hard to believe that this day is here. We all feel this loss acutely, but none more than you, Beverly. What a blessing it is to look out and see Dean's and your greatest legacy: Ann and Chris, Sarah and Joel, Tim; grandchildren and great-grandchildren. A family of faith that Dean loved beyond measure. We all lean on one another today, trusting in the promise of the gospel that Pastor Lueking preached from this pulpit for forty-four years. Death is a conquered enemy. I thought today about wrapping this up with some words from the esteemed, illustrious, and not-quite real theologian, Franz Bibfeldt, but thought better of it. Instead, one more time from this pulpit, we can hear Pastor Lueking speak: "My hope," he writes, "is to keep the conversation going, confirming the Spirit's zeal upon each other, affirming gifts, admonishing and receiving admonition, equipping God's people for the ministry of the baptized in the world, and finding enough time along the way to stand back with hope, joy, and wonder, marveling at the grace of it all." Thank you, Dean, for showing us where to look for God's grace. And thank you, Jesus, for your grace that is all in all. Death is defeated. Life abounds. Alleluia! Amen.

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