



(Since Easter this year falls on April 1, I have to wonder - if Jesus sees his shadow when he leaves the tomb, --- will we have five more weeks of Lent?) [My April Fools' joke for the day...]

Since last year I have been saving for this sermon an intriguing article I found in *The New Yorker* magazine entitled, "The God Pill." The author, Tad Friend, describes a fascinating scene.

In an evening meeting a year ago, a group of venture capitalists, medical scientists and Hollywood stars gathered for a series of presentations. The speakers and listeners shared one illusive but enticing goal: eternal life.

These well-bankrolled, so-called "Immortalists" divide themselves into two camps. One group is called The Meat Puppets — people who believe that we can retool our biology and live longer, maybe even forever. Then there are The Robocops — those who believe that we will eventually be able to download our minds into a robot or "the cloud" and so attain a sort of eternal consciousness.

One of the participants, Dr. Yoon Jun, described his perspective like this: "I have the idea that aging is plastic, malleable, that it's encoded. If something is encoded, you can crack the code." To growing applause, he went on, "If you can crack the code, you can hack the code!"

This, I suppose, is the ultimate hack: immortality.

A number of prominent biologists have criticized "immortality research" for employing sketchy science. Still, you can't help wondering: What if they succeed? What would it mean for population growth? What would it mean for the planet and its resources? What implications would it have for the economy?

Mostly, though, *The New Yorker* story left me wondering: What is behind this impulse? Why do people want to hack their way to immortality?

One clue lies in a common thread woven through the lives of the Immortalists. Nearly every one of them experienced the death of a parent when they were young.

Larry Ellison, the founder of Oracle, the fifth-wealthiest person in America, someone who has donated hundreds of millions of dollars to aging research, lost his adoptive mother when he was 22.

Ellison told his biographer, “Death has never made any sense to me. How can a person be there and then just cease to exist — just not be there?”

Death is a thief. Death robs us of those we love. Death is a hollow, separating, life-nullifying force. Death is our biggest enemy. It must not be allowed to win. We must beat back death.

On this point, most of us agree. Countless people have dedicated their lives to beating back the force of death. I’m talking about doctors and nurses, yes, but also researchers and relief workers, counselors and teachers. I am talking about every courageous soul who has ever taken a very deep breath and said; “No. No, death: you can’t come in here.”

But beyond resistance, what is our next move? What’s our strategy? Figure out how to hack our DNA? Is there another way? Another strategy? Today’s a good day to ask. Isn’t that what Easter is for?

According to Scripture, death works carefully to orchestrate the events of Holy Week. It skulks in the background, applauding the betrayals, trials and torture of Jesus. It grabs the conductor’s baton when Christ climbs the hill named Golgotha,

“The Skull.” And finally, when the curtain falls on Good Friday, death takes a cynical bow.

But four people — all women — refuse to let death have the last word. In their act of resistance, they travel to the tomb of their crucified friend. They come to wash Jesus’ body. They come, motivated by love, to push back against the power of death. Since midday Friday these women had been thinking of what to pack, what to bring along for their walk to the tomb.

And when the faintest ray of sunlight allowed them to travel, to do what Jewish law considered work, they grabbed what had been on their mental list: ointments, salves and linen filled their basket.

Oil lamps were lit so they could find their way in the dark.

Their plan was simple. With one final gesture they would pay their last respects to their friend. They would loosen the grave cloth, rub ointment and oil on the dead body, and anoint him with the scent of herbs. It was a simple gesture, a common gesture that showed you cared for the one who had died, showed that his life had worth, that his body could rest now and that it could do so in dignity. That is what the women had come to do.

But you and I know that they would never carry out their plan. Because when they arrived at the tomb, the early morning light falling into the tomb would suddenly double up on itself, and the sun outside got help from the radiant brilliance inside of the grave. Instead of a body, the women saw two men sitting there, in shining garments. It is clear to the women that these are heavenly beings, so they fall face-down in fright, but then get up to listen. What the two messengers say to them is the first Easter message ever preached. The message is both a question and a command. The question that the angels are asking is a question directed at us, too. "Why are you looking for the living among the dead?"

They could have just as well asked: Why search for life in a death zone? Or, what are you doing, digging in the dirt when you're looking for lilies and daffodils? The angels are saying to the women and to us that we are looking for something precious, but we're doing so in the wrong places.

When you think about it and let these words sink in, the message is straightforward enough, but where's the Easter message? True enough, you won't find life by looking inside a casket. You won't meet the living by sitting by a grave. We don't like to hear that. We hate to give up. But deep down we know it's true.

Of course the truth is that to love something, you need to accept and understand the adversity that comes with it.

Letting go is incredibly hard to do. But Jesus' resurrection is less about letting go than making necessary adjustments.

And as we listen to the angels continue, we hear the second part of their message: "Remember what Jesus told you about himself."

Jesus had said that he would rise again, but first he said that he would be killed.

It must have been hard for anyone to put those two things together. Jesus had indeed died. That was a fact. So also was the fact that he was no longer in the tomb.

There is a strange, painful feeling of emptiness that remains after a death, which seems to get bigger the longer we do nothing about it. I have a personal practice of buying a plant after every funeral I do (and I have a lot of plants!) There is an emptiness after death that needs to be filled, if not with the anointing of the loved one, then with reminiscing and tears and pictures and sharing stories... the stories are especially revealing, life-affirming and important. We don't

have to empty the tomb ourselves, we just have to remember that it's already been done for us.

Remembering Jesus and his words doesn't mean that we buy him flowers, that we honor him like we do those in whose honor we have bought Easter flowers for today. Remembering Jesus' words means that we realize that the God who loves us does not hold back from coming to us in person; it means being vulnerable and subject to human frailty, cruelty and death.

Today's Immortalists, seeking biological eternity, want to hack your DNA and make your body last longer. Easter wants to hack your heart, your head, your beliefs, your daily routines, your relationships, your way of looking at the world.

Easter doesn't simply want to extend your life; Easter wants you to listen to Jesus and then embrace life. Easter changes things.

One final thing about the first Easter sermon the angels preached: it took place inside a tomb, with Jesus nowhere in sight. This may well mean that we first have to go to the tombs and closets in our lives to begin our search. Entering those tombs, stepping into the darkness and silence is part of the Easter story, too. It may mean facing the dark secret that we have been carrying for years and letting ourselves be forgiven for it. It can mean coming clean with a conscience that has been troubling us. It can mean meeting with the one against whom we have harbored a grudge or a deep dislike. It could even mean asking God to deliver us from our hardened and cynical opinions; to open our hearts anew to life.

It's true that Jesus is no longer in the dark tomb. Christ is risen and has gone from it; now alive and active in the world.

We are likely to miss seeing Jesus in our homes and in our lives unless we have listened to the angels and done what they are telling us to do: Remember Jesus. Listen to him. Study his word and follow him.

This side of eternity, it is the best we can do. It is what we are called to do. Listen, read, love, serve, care for others, follow.

God will take care of eternity well enough. Proclaim Jesus' alive in your life. Christ is risen! Alleluia. Amen.