

“The Door”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
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I had just entered that liminal state between sleep and wakefulness when someone knocked on the door. I was not happy. It was midnight after a long day observing The General Convention in Indianapolis back in 1994. I was tired, a little bit lonely, and I figured somebody had gotten drunk and couldn't figure out which hotel room was theirs.

Served me right, I suppose, for picking the cheapest hotel I could find, out by the Indianapolis Speedway, but I had just graduated from college and was making my way toward Alexandria, where in a few weeks I would begin seminary. The convention hotels cost a fortune, and I needed every penny.

I made my way to the door of the room, ready to tell them to get lost in somewhat colorful language, and as I reached for the latch, I paused to look through the peephole. Thank God. Standing outside my door were two young men with pistols drawn.

I backed away from the door very slowly and quietly, picked up the phone, dragged it into the bathroom, and called the front desk. They promised to call me back. Once they did, a few minutes later, which felt like several years, I was informed that a convenience store across the street had just been robbed at gunpoint. The criminals were looking for a place to hide. I was informed to stay in my room with the door locked, which is perhaps the most unnecessary thing anyone has ever said to me.

It's the closest I've ever gotten to having a gun pointed at my head, and had I not taken a look through that peephole, I've no doubt that I would have been initiated into that select and miserable fraternity of people who have had a gun pointed at their head.

To this day, I cannot stay in a hotel with doors that do not open into a hallway. Had I opened the door that night back in '94, I might have been killed.

It was a long night, to say the least, and the exciting controversies of The General Convention suddenly seemed distant and unimportant. I called my sister, but not my parents, who didn't hear this story until several years after the fact.

Indianapolis was a more beautiful city than I remembered when morning dawned. Coffee tasted better. The parking garage next to the convention center didn't smell as bad, and the protestors with their hateful placards didn't bother me nearly as much as they had the day before. Amazing how a little brush with death can fine tune your perceptions and help you appreciate little things we generally tend to take for granted.

I consider myself lucky, because my brush with death came via room service, clear and concise. Others may have similar stories, or even worse, but most people make it most of their lives without any serious encounter with their mortality. In fact, we live in a culture that makes the topic taboo. We can watch it on the news or be entertained by movies dripping with violence and death, but we don't talk about it much and we may think about our mortality even less.

This is why the resurrection of Jesus Christ can be so hard to feel in our bones, the way I felt fear burning through my marrow that night in Indianapolis. The life we receive at Easter, both the promise of everlasting life and the reality of renewed life here and now, is something we cannot appreciate fully until we engage at some level the terrible fact that without exception, all must someday perish.

But if we pause for a moment to reflect on our frailty, the excruciating shortness of life, the utter unpredictability we endure under constant mortal threat, from violence,

accident, and disease, then we may begin to feel in greater measure that blessed wave of relief I felt once it was clear that the gunmen were gone.

Once we fathom the appalling presence of death, we begin to treasure much more the extraordinary sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf, and we start to realize how precious the life Jesus gave us truly is, both his and ours. And this is an occasion for exuberant and persistent rejoicing.

As we celebrate life, we grow in awe and wonder that such an astonishing thing should exist at all. Astronomers tell us that Earth circles the sun in what has been dubbed “The Goldilocks Zone.” A few thousand miles closer, our atmosphere would evaporate; a few thousand miles farther away, every drop of water would permanently freeze. Leaves, which will prove such a nuisance this autumn, spring forth with an abundance and intricate design that no human skill can replicate, and we realize that we are living a miracle. It’s a miracle, just to be alive.

But being alive is more than breathing and eating and sleeping and working and playing. When we are alive in Christ Jesus, there opens for us a transcendence that brings peace and purpose and perspective. There is a quality of buoyancy granted those who live by faith. There is a certain type of focus that can only be called devotion, a devotion that inspires us to receive with gratitude the gift of each new day.

Of course, it’s easy to get distracted, what with all the challenges that constantly present themselves. Just getting out of bed can feel Herculean from time to time. But in these moments, we need to remember that we are alive, not dead, because Jesus is alive, not dead. God wants us to care, as God cares for us. God wants us to create and share and explore and comfort and encourage with reckless abandon, until we’re breathless

with the awareness of how much possibility God invests in every life, even the humble leaf, without which, by the way, none of us could breathe.

I kept my flimsy one-and-a-quarter inch plywood door with flaking paint closed one dark night 16 years ago. I have opened many doors since, and hope that the opportunity arises to open many more. But tonight, tonight we stand at the door of the greatest mystery the world has ever known, and each day, for the rest of our lives, God wants us to open that door and live our lives and cherish and savor each moment. To do so is to experience a partial yet powerful resurrection. God is knocking. Amen.