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## *Good Friday: The Secret of Life*

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**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler**  
**Atlanta, Georgia**  
**Good Friday**

*"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." -Psalm 31:5*

Christians gather on Good Friday for the same reason that we gather on any other day at church. We gather to walk, to walk with Jesus.

I like this walk. In fact, I need this walk, just like I need to walk every week of the year""no matter where I am. I have walked in the mountains of North Georgia, in the hills of middle Georgia, on the beaches of South Georgia.

Two weeks ago, as is my practice in Atlanta, I walked this very neighborhood, where I know most of the roads now. I know where the sidewalks are and where they are not. I know where certain birds like to congregate. I know where there are hawks, right here in urban Atlanta. In fact, I have seen foxes, all sorts of snakes, even coyote and deer. I don't need to be walking in rural areas to see those animals.

And, of course, I have seen their life cycles""young birds in nests in the Spring, and the run-over possums and squirrels in the streets. Anyone who walks a lot sees dead things, real live dead things.

Two weeks ago, however, I saw something quite unusual for me. I was along West Paces Ferry Road, here in Atlanta, surely one of the nicest streets in the city. Almost every house on that beautiful street seems to be a mansion, including, of course, the Governor's Mansion. Some of those homes are truly spectacular.

As I was walking alongside one of those homes, I saw a huge and growling machine. When I was a young boy, I called them steam shovels. I think they are called excavators now, or power shovels, with big diesel engines, and full of hydraulic hoses. It was loud and powerful.

I had to stop and watch. As I paused, the skillful operator turned the saber-toothed bucket right toward the house. Then, with a careful swipe, the bucket tore off a complete wall of one of the upstairs bedrooms.

This was not an accident. The power shovel excavator was there for demolition work. The machine was deliberately and very methodically destroying that beautiful house. The destruction was quite carefully arranged. There was no wrecking ball just careening around everywhere. First the shovel tore off a piece of the roof, and then a section of the wall, with pipes and wires and conduits hanging out. Every few minutes, the bucket would carry the debris to a nearby waiting truck.

Only when that upstairs room was completely gone, did the operator turn to the adjacent room. Slowly and deliberately, the entire house was coming down. I watched for about fifteen minutes, and then I continued my walk.

I was sad, of course. I was actually sad for the house, imagining what sorts of activities and lives had developed within those walls. I thought of the sad and horrified neighbors. But I was sad for the previous inhabitants, too. Some of them were probably glad to see the house go. Surely at least one of them was. Maybe it was too old to maintain properly any more. Maybe a new owner of the lot wants to start all over again. Whatever the reason, that beautiful home, constructed so carefully and sturdily, was going the way of all flesh.

The next day, I was walking again. Obviously, I wanted to pass by the house again, and I did. By the next day, there was no house there at all. It was an empty space, with a heap of rubble resting below, a pile of broken beams and splintered wood and crumbled plaster and cracked concrete. It was what I expected, but I was stunned. It was a picture of Psalm 103:16, "the wind passes over it, and it is gone; and its place knows it no more."

But then, as I paused, I saw something else I did not expect. One of the tall white oak trees in the back yard was now the predominant feature of that lot. The tree was still bare with winter gray and no sign of leaves yet. But at the top, at the very top of the bare tree, sat one of my favorite birds, a red-shouldered hawk, surveying the land. I would not have seen the bird if the house were still there.

In fact, the hawk may not have even been there if the house were still standing. He was probably up there waiting for the inevitable mice and rodents who would be fleeing the scene; he was probably looking to take advantage of a newly cleared hunting ground. I thought of Luke 17:37, "where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather."

This week is about walking. It began with the rather fun and glorious procession of Palm Sunday; and today, that walk leads us to the cross.

That walk leads us, with Jesus, to where he breathes his last and says, "Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46). He was praying the Psalms when he said that, as he often prayed the psalms. He was reciting Psalm 31:5, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

If we had heard him continue that psalm, we would have heard him say,

"I am the scorn of all my adversaries,  
A horror to my neighbors,  
An object of dread to my acquaintances;  
Those who see me in the street flee from me.  
I have passed out of mind like one who is dead;  
I have become like a broken vessel" (Ps. 31:11-12).

Jesus, the heroic figure of spiritual strength, the one who made the blind see and who made the lame walk, is now a broken vessel himself. His body, a structure containing such spirit that he could walk on water, that he could still storms, that he could walk through angry crowds—that body is now crumbling and falling like a demolished house. "Into your hands I commend my spirit."

Jamie Quatro, a new author from Lookout Mountain, Tennessee, has recently written an engaging book of short stories, one of the most provocative ones titled, simply, "Demolition." In that story, a strange deaf man shows up one day in the local, steadfast, faithful stone church. But after a few Sundays of his attendance, a small piece of one of the stained glass windows falls out. It is the image of Jesus's foot. Over the course of several weeks, other pieces of windows randomly fall out, for no reason whatsoever. The other physical pieces of the church are foundationally secure.

Then, as the windows start falling out, the parishioners begin to see God's natural world in a new way. Indeed, the images before their eyes are so startling and new, so provocative and fresh, that the parishioners decide to actually tear off the roof of the church and see the sky. Then they decide to tear down the walls, very deliberately. They realize that the missing stained glass was actually a gift, and "for the first time [they] could see each other worshiping in the natural light" (Jamie Quatro, "Demolition," in *I Want to Show You More*, Kindle edition, location 2471). Ultimately, the entire church is demolished.

The story continues with some shocks, because this fresh spirit in the church also leads to possible irresponsibility and a re-discovery of sin. But the point is that demolition, even the destruction of buildings and structures we hold to be precious and dear, can lead to new perspective and new life. Again, the demolition of what is familiar in our lives is certainly risky, because the lack of structure can lead to irresponsibility, too; but it leads finally to new life.

Sometimes the structures of our lives need to fall away. In fact, they don't simply *need* to fall away. They *will* fall away. They will be destroyed. They will die.

For me, this is the secret of life. I was walking along a beach a month ago when I thought about it this way. Things die; this is the secret of life. I was walking along shells and seaweed, even old carcasses of dead fish and a few birds. I saw where pigs had dug up and eaten turtle eggs. I saw birds eating other flesh. I saw lots of bones. And, yet, as beaches are, it was somehow beautiful; I felt alive.

What is the secret of life? The secret of life is death. The secret of life is that everything dies. At our Christian funerals, we say as much; "All we go down to the dust." Even Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life""even Jesus, who is eternal life""even Jesus, dies.

And he doesn't just die. He dies slowly, deliberately, methodically, even terribly. It is his death, this death, which sums up the deaths of a million other creatures. Jesus dies.

If we are to walk with Jesus, if we are to walk the walk of Jesus, then we, too, must encounter death""deliberately, methodically, courageously.

In our lives, walls and structures will fall away. In our lives, bones and skin will fall away, too. We can see it daily if we pay attention while we are walking. Parts of us die. Good parts of us die, parts that were necessary and beautiful and sturdily built. One day, the time comes when they are demolished.

But demolition is not the end. That demolition, and our death to the old, makes way for something new. When the house was demolished, the red-shouldered hawk became visible and alive. In the same way, it is the destruction of our old structures that makes way for the love of God to be renewed in us.

Jesus talked about love. Jesus taught us deeply about love. But, today, Good Friday, is the day that Jesus *shows* us love. It is when Jesus lets his old life be torn down, when he lets his body be demolished, that we are able to truly see love.

Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The scriptures say he was talking about the temple of his body (John 2:19-21).

When that temple crumbles, when even the walls of our beautiful churches are torn down, when we let down the finely furnished walls of our own lives, then it is that we see the love of God shining in a new way.

And that, ultimately, is the meaning of today, Good Friday. The old falls away. The structures of our lives die. Even our very lives die. The secret of life is death. But if we keep on walking, we see; we see that every death in our lives also shows us a new way to love in our lives.

Good Friday, then, is ultimately about love. It is a death, for sure, an occasion for us to die to ourselves. But we see today, that love is stronger. If we die with Christ, we will also live with him; and we will love with Christ in a new way.

AMEN.

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