

Moving On...?

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By Rev Paul Graham

Read Acts 12:1-19



If you are, like me, a fan of crime fiction and dramas, you are used to reading about or watching death as it is played out on page and screen. Take a good murder mystery, maybe one featuring a certain Belgian detective or any number of angst-ridden Scandinavians, and you will find yourself immersed in a world where death plays a central role. However, unless the plot follows the path of a serial killer, it is more often than not the death that launches our (usually flawed) hero onto a course that generally ends in justice and the unmasking of the villain.

But though we might discover, usually post-mortem, some aspects of the victim's life that will help lead us to their murderer, the victim can be left short-changed in the narrative. If we've read "Murder on the Orient Express", for example, we might remember whodunnit, but we might not so readily recall that much about who it was "dunn" to (as it were).

It's even worse when you get to Tellyland. There's a rich tradition of the red uniformed crewmember on the USS Enterprise in Star Trek. Christened "Ensign Roadkill", this is the character whose only role in the show is to materialise on an alien planet with Captain Kirk, Spock, et al and be the first to die at the hands of the alien enemy. We never even know their names...[\[1\]](#)

Watch any action film, or war film, and you will see the body count rise as nameless victims fall to the ground and we the audience neither know of, nor care about, their background. I must be honest, I'm too busy following the hero or despairing at the many convenient ways that they continue to survive when so many others aren't so lucky.

So, it comes as a bit of a shock to be reminded that in our reading today, though we tend to focus on Peter and his miraculous escape from prison (indeed, the NIV subtitles the passage as such), we first encounter death. James, brother of John, one of the first called by Jesus to follow him, leaves the story of the church in abrupt and sudden circumstances. There is no epitaph or follow-up. Unlike Stephen in Acts 8:2, there is no mention of his burial or the reaction of his friends. Even Ananias and Saphira are given more attention by Luke to their deaths than poor James (Acts 5:6 & 10).

Why Luke moves so quickly from the tragic death of James to Peter is not included in his narrative. It could be that he wants to move from the darkness of grief to the light of release as quickly as possible. In the midst of death, there is hope, he might be saying. Which, for us today, is no bad thing to be hearing.

But there is something about this that makes me feel uncomfortable. Why is it, I find myself asking, that I've never before noticed this tragic event? Why have I been so quick to move to Peter without acknowledging someone was also one of the founding members of Jesus' band of followers (Luke 5:8-11, Luke 6:13-16)?

And this brings me up short again with the world today.

Maybe it's human nature to want to see something good beyond the bad. There are those for whom the glass is always half-full, but it's not those people I'm talking about (there are also people whose glass is half-empty and yet others whose glass lies in fragments at their feet, but I'm not talking about them either). Certainly, there's the tradition of the "...and finally" story on ITN's News at Ten; the whimsical stories that help lighten the mood after half an hour of unrelenting doom and gloom.

Maybe it's a reminder that there is hope beyond despair. For those whose every day is riven with depression, who live in a world of shadows, and where tomorrow seems to be an unreachable goal, stories like Peter's miraculous escape from prison provide a glimpse into a possible brighter future. If you are one of those people, then I absolutely hope and pray that you will discover God's accompanying angels surrounding you and will be guided by them out of your situation.

However, we might instead be at risk of moving too quickly.

Certainly, there are many in the church (as well as those in government, etc) who are ploughing ahead towards the freedom that Peter enjoyed without considering the effects of James' death on the community.

We need space to grieve.

We need space to mourn.

We need space to lament.

We need to allow time and space to recognise that we will not get Summer 2020 again. We won't get the opportunity to meet together for our church barbecue this year, or Books and Butties, or any of the other times that we would usually gather that had to be cancelled. Weddings that were being planned for years and then delayed won't be the same; even if they have a new date in the diary, there will always be anniversaries that should have been. Holidays much anticipated may yet be enjoyed in 2021, but we will always know what the weather would have been like had we been there if only we had been able to go.

And then there are the losses we've had to endure. Not just the loss of life due to COVID-19, but all the others who are no longer with us, whose deaths were marked in very different ways than we would have wanted or hoped. The emotional and mental cost of this pandemic is at risk of being overlooked as we as a world endeavour to recover our finances.

So, we need time and space to grieve, and not be afraid if we can't charge ahead as others might demand of us.

We also need to be sure that we aren't looking to replace our sense of loss with something else. It might seem easier to move onto something new, possibly even better than before, but we need to recognise what isn't there any more. At this time of pandemic, we run the risk of being like Luke and seeking out the good news story, rather than giving the tragedy the recognition that is needed.

However, we also need to be wise in this.

We might need to recognise that Luke was being very deliberate in moving so quickly from tragedy, even to the comedy of Peter being left outside while everyone else celebrated his release. There is a rich literary tradition in this; centuries later, Shakespeare famously breaks up the relentlessly bleak action in Macbeth and Hamlet with the light-hearted repartee of the doorman and gravediggers (honest, they're a hoot).

But there has to be an appropriate balance struck in this. As much as we might be prepared to start tomorrow, we might need to be mindful of those who aren't ready to leave yesterday behind yet. Luke was keen to move swiftly from James' death to Peter's brief sojourn in prison, and we might want to follow suit. But just remember there are those who will still need to shed a tear for James and all that he represents.

Amen.

[\[1\]](#) *The spoof sci-fi film "Galaxy Quest" plays on this theme by having one of these bit-part characters play a key role in the film. If you haven't seen it already, I strongly recommend that you do - it has the late great Alan Rickman in it as well...*

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