One of the most startling moments of my life occurred in a preaching class while I was a seminary student at Andover Newton. We had each been assigned a day for offering a sermon. And this day I’m remembering was not my day. But the student appointed for that day was not present. The rest of us sat nervously waiting to see what the professor would do, perhaps call on one of us for an extemporaneous speech! Then, the door opened and a human form entered the room. Dan had covered himself, head to toe, with some mixture of flour and baking soda and Miracle Whip. He calmly walked to the front of the class and introduced himself as Death. He spoke in the first person, singular, a monologue. We sat there riveted to our seats. We were prepared to receive a scholarly exposition on a Biblical text, not a personal chat from a death impersonator. I actually don’t remember much of what he said, only that it came as a shock and that I ended up feeling grateful for his opening up the conversation about death. I don’t think Dan spoke as if he had all the answers about death, but he spoke as if he knew it were an important conversation to be having.

That memory of Dan’s dramatic entrance into the classroom was buried in some deep place in my unconsciousness. That memory was triggered when I read the Gospel passage from John for today. “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

Here we have Jesus beginning to talk with his disciples about his own death. One gets the impression they were not thrilled that he would raise this issue. They would rather he talk about anything else under the sun. But he persists.
It’s a conversation he chooses not to duck. He needs to talk about it and he needs his friends to talk about it with him.

As Jesus continues to speak about his death, it becomes clear that he is communicating on two levels. He is speaking literally about his own death, and he is speaking metaphorically about things that need to die in order for something else to be born. He rarely talks about his death without also talking about his resurrection. The two go hand in hand. It is always ‘in the greatest of hope’ that he speaks of his death.

When Jesus speaks to his friends about his death, he does so hinting that it will have a redemptive impact on humanity. He talks about his death as if it would be a birth, a life-giving surrender. This is why we refer to the Friday before Easter as Good Friday. The death on the cross is God’s way of entering into every form of human suffering with a reconciling energy.

I’ve told you about my second all-time favorite movie. In this film, Sammy Davis, Jr. plays a naïve foot soldier. He doesn’t know when his army buddies are joking around and when they’re being serious. He is the sad sack who always bites on the trickster’s bait. And he never seems to wise up. He loves his army buddies; would do anything for them. Their conniving pranks don’t alter the loyalty of his friendship. Finally, the soldiers cook up the ultimate scheme. They plan to pull the pin on a false hand grenade, and then laugh as the Sammy Davis, Jr. character runs for cover. The moment for the prank arrives. They are all standing around together. The unpinned grenade is dropped in the midst of them. Instead of running for cover as they all fully expect, the private throws himself upon the grenade, yelling for everyone to run to safety. This time, no one laughs. No one slaps his knee in mock hilarity. Everyone is stunned to silence by this expression of unconditional love. And no one is the same after this moment.
All the relationships with the private in that army unit are reconciled, made new. No more disrespect. No more dehumanizing. No more taking advantage of the one who is weak.

When Jesus talks with his friends about his death, he wants them to see how it will be a cosmic turning point, how, like the soldiers in that army unit who were reconciled with each other; the whole creation will be reconciled to the Creator. The disciples can not possibly grasp this truth at the time Jesus speaks it. But after the Resurrection, they do! After Easter, they get it! This death is a reconciling death. It is a death that gives a whole new definition to life.

On Friday afternoon, I had one of those providential experiences. And I tell this story now with Bob and Wendy’s permission. I happened to be a Hartford Hospital. And I happened to walk over to the Harry Gray Cancer Center. And I happened upon Wendy Haller who was waiting for Bob to emerge from the radiation chamber. In a minute or two, a nurse wheeled him out and we headed up to his room on the 12th floor. In the elevator, he recognized me. He looked up at me and he asked, “How’s your mother?” I said, “Bob, here you are dealing with tumors on your brain, enduring your fourth radiation treatment, in obvious discomfort, how is it that you think to ask about my mother?”

And Bob said, “Isn’t that what life is all about?” And I simply thanked him for once again being my teacher. I don’t know how long Bob Haller will live. What I do know is that his ordeal is giving a new definition to life, and that his wisdom on the elevator is a reconciling wisdom, a wisdom that is life-giving.

There is something that doesn’t happen until the grain of wheat is planted in the ground, until it dies to its former way of being and becomes a new creation. Anyone who has ever sowed a seed in a garden knows this truth.
There is something that isn’t born until the old way of thinking is allowed to die. There is an exuberance that can not come to life until a fear is buried, until a prejudice is put to rest, until a sin is confessed, until a certain story is told. There is a brokenness that is not reconciled until a truth is spoken, until a grudge is released, until a hatred is allowed to perish.

When Jesus spoke of his own death, he also had in mind the death of those things that separate us from one another, the death of all those things that separate us from our own self, the death of all those things that separate us from the living God. It was Jesus’ great hope that his death would release such a powerfully reconciling energy into the world that rich and poor would embrace each other, that the powerful and the powerless would trust each other, that the natives and the newcomers would coincide in peace, that people of different tongues would learn a common language, that jocks and nerds would walk hand in hand, that enchilada lovers and New England clam chowder lovers could order off the same menu. You get my drift!

There is something awesomely reconciling about Christ’s death. One can read about it in the pages of Scripture. But how much more exciting to actually experience it in the real world, on an elevator on the way to the 12th floor, or just about anyplace where people come together in God’s name.

The disciples didn’t care much for the topic of death. I suppose we don’t either. It doesn’t make for great table talk. Yet, as we approach Good Friday, I feel an urgency to talk together about the truth of Christ’s reconciling love, made real to us on the cross and again at the empty tomb. In the greatest of hope, Amen!