



A different word please

"Don't be shocked. Yesterday John's daughter died. I just wanted to let you know."

I was shocked. But by something other than what my companion expected. I knew that John's daughter was incurably ill and that it could not last much longer. But there was something wrong. Did John's daughter die? That was not possible. She had told me herself that she was so tired and that she wanted to sleep. So I said, "I don't believe it at all. Don't say that she is dead; she has fallen asleep." The messenger smiled at me compassionately.

All because of Mark 5:35-43. There we read about the daughter of Jairus. When Jesus arrives at Jairus' house, the undertakers have already been informed. Female mourners and flute players have been hired to vent their sorrow with much pomp. It is a terrible drama. A twelve-year-old girl has died.

A strange question sounds above the wailing: "Why do you make a tumult and weep?"

What a question! How would you react if someone said to you as you stood by the dead body of a child, "Why are you crying?" Christ does not say you must keep a stiff upper lip. He understands the gnawing pain and the bitter grief which no words can describe. Yet He asks a question. Why exactly are you sad? Some people think that sorrow is very personal; no one may touch it. But Christ does not leave it alone and asks His question. Do I not make it more difficult for myself than necessary? And may I? Is maybe my sorrow so great because my faith is too small?

Christ says, "*The child is sleeping.*" Giggles are heard from all sides. Christ's words sounded just as unlikely then as they do today. The mourners and flute players don't want to accept it. The death experts interrupt their professional wailing and really have to laugh. She is sleeping? Come on, man. Get real! Dead is dead! How sad a laugh without faith!

Do you dare to say in all seriousness at the funeral of a twelve-year-old, "Our dear child is not dead, but she is sleeping"? It seems like trying to heal a bleeding heart, using a euphemism to disguise the raw reality. Just be honest and call a spade a spade: she is dead.

But that's a mistake! The New Testament shows a great preference for the word "sleeping" when it speaks about those who die in Christ. "She is sleeping," says Christ. Not because she is apparently dead, but because Christ really is more powerful than death. The living Lord gives a new name to death. Thanks to Christ's suffering and resurrection, death is no longer the same. The oppressive death penalty has given way to a free thoroughfare. Paul writes, "*Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep*" (1 Corinthians 15:20).

The biblical expression "sleeping" is therefore fitting, because by it we understand that the soul, the person himself, lives with God (in full consciousness), just as one lives while he is asleep. Yet a little while, on the great morning, and the body shall follow, just as one arises after a night's sleep.

Christ sends the laughers away. Only the parents and the most intimate students go along to the bedroom. And then not much is needed. In the same way as one takes a sleeping child by the hand to awaken him, Christ takes the girl by the hand. And He only says, "*Little girl, arise.*" There is no powerful struggle, no fight between life and death.

When Elijah stayed with the widow, her son died. Then Elijah had to do much more. Three times he stretched himself over the child, crying aloud to the Lord. But Jesus did not wrest a dead one from the dead. He awakened a girl.

A gravestone does not have a lock. The door closes and there is no one in the whole country who can make a key. But Christ says, "*Fear not, I died, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.*" With just one word He turns the key; He makes Jairus's daughter awake. The Lord and Master of life and death then appears to show loving attention to the girl. "*Give her something to eat.*"

Is John's daughter dead? A different word please; she is asleep. May the word used by Christ and Paul become part of our active vocabulary.

G Gunnink

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