

# “I will tell you a mystery”

## A funeral sermon

Paul Dyck

**F**ive years ago, in the spring of 1989, Kerry Lepp decided he wanted to be baptized. He wrote out his statement of faith, and on testimony night he told us, “I was born and raised in a Christian home. I went to church all my life and always took for granted that being a Christian just meant going to church once a week. As I grew older, I really didn’t care about church or God. I guess you could say I was a falling Christian. Until my Mom died. Then I was really upset. I thought for sure that God hated me and

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wanted my life to be miserable. Then about two or three months after my Dad remarried I realized that God wanted my life to change. Very slowly, my Christian walk went uphill, and now I am learning incredible new things about God. I hope this learning will never stop. I am very glad God changed me. I have been able to live a clean, healthy life, and I love it.”

I remember how touched I was by that testimony five years ago, by its clarity and simple honesty. It’s take-me-as-I-am Kerry,

revealing what’s going on in the depths of his heart, admitting his failures, and acknowledging his struggle with God over his mother’s death. And announcing, with characteristic flair, his faith and his joy about God changing his life, his gratitude for the life God gave him. Kerry’s words convey his warmth. No wonder he had so many friends. No wonder so many people, especially kids, liked to be with him. No wonder so many people are here today. No wonder our grief is so intense.

How have you grieved these past five days? How many tears have you cried? How many times have you thought, “It can’t be true. Could Kerry really have died?” Or has the shock and numb-

ness worn off for you? What comes after it, and how are you coping? How are you dealing with Kerry's death? Most of all, I wonder what effect it will have on you, how Kerry's death will change you in the days, weeks, months, and years to come.

I want to talk about that change, about God changing us, the way God changed Kerry. We see a particularly compelling face of death today, a face of death that changes us because we can't push it away. Usually we tell ourselves that death happens to someone else. It's for old people, not for young folks like us. It's for people in other countries, not for us. And accidents happen to people we don't know; we read about them in the newspaper. But now, because of who Kerry was to us, death struck so close that we can't push it away. It struck so unexpectedly, so drastically, and with such force that we are changed by it.

We are different people than we were a week ago. We've been confronted with the frailty of life, with the preciousness of life, with the nearness of death, even our own death. We understand what James meant when he wrote, "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.' Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (James 4:13-14).

Today we know the truth of James's words, and that truth changes us. We—you and I and Kerry—are each but a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Because of Kerry's death you and I won't be taking our tomorrows for granted for a while. We realize we don't know for sure what will happen tomorrow, at some intersection of life. We know that behind the mist that is our life stands death.

But when we draw close to death, we draw close to God, and the mysteries of God. We draw close to eternity. And to draw close to God is to change. To feel death and eternity close at hand is life changing. The apostle Paul tries to explain as well as he can, as well as words allow him, part of this mystery, part of our entry into eternity, part of the changing of our perishable mist of life into an imperishable body that is alive with God. He writes, "Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last

trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality” (1 Cor. 15:51-53).

We cannot fathom God’s mystery. We cannot make sense of all of life, and we cannot answer all our questions about death. But listen to this mystery, this miracle of change: In a moment, at the

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intersection of two roads last Wednesday morning, things changed drastically and tragically. Something happened to Kerry’s frail mist of life on earth that it would be unable to survive. A few hours later, in the ambulance on the way to Winnipeg, in another moment, things changed again, mysteriously and miraculously. That perishable mist was clothed imperishably. Kerry’s death was

swallowed up in the victory of Christ’s life after death. And the sting of death, for him, was gone. Whatever trumpets there are in heaven were heard by a Kerry who had again been changed by God.

Listen again to what Kerry wrote in his testimony about how his life was changed, turned around, and moving up toward God. It’s as if already then he was describing this greater change. “My Christian walk went uphill, and now I am learning incredible new things about God. I hope this learning will never stop. . . . I am very glad God changed me. . . . I love it.” Today Kerry’s words ring with new depth and truth. Oh yes, Kerry, I believe your faith took you toward God, and I can’t imagine what incredible new things you are learning about God. And no, this learning won’t stop. In fact, it just began anew the day you died. How you must love it, dear Kerry. How glad you must be that God changed you.

Yet we cry, and with good reason. We feel the pain of separation. We feel the sorrow of loss. We feel the disorientation and shock of a vigorous life suddenly cut far too short. And we feel the sting of death, even as it brings us close to God. This moment is full of mystery and paradox for us. The sting of death that’s been swallowed up in victory for Kerry brings great grief to us, yet in that grief we find ourselves on holy ground, in the presence of God. That’s where we sit today: trembling, on holy ground, close

to God, with tears trickling down our cheeks, stinging with confusion and hurt, unable to see well.

It's as if we are stuck living on the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter. In this life we sometimes get caught between that terrible dark day on which Jesus died and was laid in the tomb, and the mysterious, miraculous day when the earth quaked, the stone rolled away, angels came, and Jesus rose from the dead. We're stuck in the shock, despair, and grief of Kerry's tragic death. We can't see the incredible glory of resurrection. The Good Friday part of the story is with us today, but not the Easter part.

We are stuck, and we may even think the story is over because the pain is so great. But it isn't over. God has something more in mind. We'll see it better some day. We may not realize that God is here with us. But the curtain in the temple's holy of holies is already torn in two. And even now God's presence is released, is already round about us. And we stand on holy ground, with God, even if it's dark and we're feeling lost.

Are you there with me today? Is this unfamiliar territory for you? Then hang on. Hang on until Easter morning. Hang on until an angel comes to tell you the rest of the story, about how Jesus Christ who was laid in the tomb has been raised from the dead, so that all who belong to him will be made alive.

If Kerry's death has brought you close to God, and especially if that's new territory for you, let Kerry's testimony make you decide to stay there, close to God, always. Let God change you as God changed Kerry, and let the risen Christ greet you and call you by name and roll the stone of your tomb away. And hear the promise that one day—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at your intersection with eternity—God will change your frail life into imperishable life with God.

### **About the author**

Paul Dyck, currently pastor at Poole Mennonite Church near Milverton, Ontario, is delighted to be sharing life with Kathy, his wife, and their three daughters, Jessica, Rebecca, and Sonya. He was pastor at Steinbach (Manitoba) Mennonite Church from 1985–2000, and was involved in four funerals and one wedding in the Lepp family circle. Kerry Lepp was twenty-two years old when he died. More than a thousand people attended his funeral.