



URBAN CURRENT

The death of death

Six-foot-plus with a football player's build. Half black, half Polish. For years I assumed he was Puerto Rican. I wish you could meet Richard.* When our church moved into the hulking former Masonic Temple, squatting on a Kedzie Boulevard corner, the guy I would come to know as Richard always stood out as he hung out with a crowd of 20 guys in front of our building each evening. They were OAs. This was their hood. This was their corner. Now, many years later, Richard has confessed with his mouth and believed in his heart the Lord Jesus.

He's in my Grow Group that meets every Thursday night. The week after Easter we were bemoaning that Richard had to work the previous Sunday. He's a security guard at a hospital, which has served this dangerous Humboldt Park neighborhood since the early 1900s.

He was recounting the hectic happenings at his ER security post on Resurrection morning.

"Yeah, we had two rape victims come in, then we had two other girls who were hit and run..." His hands were waving. "Then we had a shooting victim brought in." Right about here I interjected, "This is all Easter morning?" "That's right," he affirmed, voice raising. "Then the Monsters* (local gang whose turf surrounds the hospital) started gathering outside the ER door trying to get in to finish off the guy they shot but failed to kill. We had to put a call into CPD (Chicago Police Department) for some help. On top of that, two overdoses came in."

This hospital is on my run route. I pass it several times a week running and driving. Over the years, I've visited this hospital more times than I can count. Richard's story of mayhem and violence with its aftermath unfolding in the early morning hours carried special weight.

While all that was going on, about a mile and a half north Armitage Baptist was lifting praises to the resurrected Christ. We were declaring the good news that Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection is victory over sin and death.

He's in the life-transforming business. That very morning, almost a score of sinners confessed Jesus as Lord in our services.

Cities are centers of death. The wages of sin is death. Cities ... more sinners ... more sin ... more wages of sin ... more death.

I can't help but think of the crime, the plagues, the fires, the wars that have wreaked havoc on cities throughout history. Even natural disasters are more dramatic and more death-dealing when they hit cities. Think of the tornado in Joplin, hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and Biloxi, and hurricane Sandy in Long Island.

Think of Jerusalem — ravaged, destroyed, blood soaks every square foot of its rocky soil. Several hundred years before Christ the Babylonians decimated the city. Several decades after Jesus, the Romans brought great horror to the sacred city. Blood fairly seeps from the pages of Josephus's record.

Jerusalem — *The city*. The city that is the center of the earth. The city central to God's grand plan. On one dark Friday it is again the center of death. This death is the death of all deaths. Three days later death is conquered in a city, *the city*.

Could it be with all the devastation Satan has hurled at humanity in cities and through cities that God chooses the city purposefully as the place where death will be conquered?

O death, where is your sting, O grave where is your victory? The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law, but thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ.



Rosa,* new to our Grow Group, sat in stunned silence. Which, if you knew Rosa, was an awfully rare occasion. There had been a knock as our group assembled. The door was flung open. Richard entered the tiny living room seemingly filling it. Rosa told me later, "I recognized him right away! I don't know if he recognized me, so I just introduced myself. Pastor, pastor, he's the guy who told my son that he was going to kill him!" "When was this," I asked? "Over 15 years ago. Right out in front of church!"

It seems Rosa's then-teenage son had some kind of run-in with Richard, who, as I said, hung out in front of our building every night with some of his crew. Rosa had literally feared for her son's life, taking precautions to avoid the big guy that ran the OA hood. Not having seen him for years, she had the spiritually jolting, emotionally shocking experience of sitting that night studying the Word of God with the very man, now her brother in Christ, who had threatened the life of her son. And doesn't God often take it up one more notch? Rosa's son now works at the hospital because Richard helped him get the job!

Jesus is the death of death in the city.

*Names changed

by Charles Lyons, Pastor
Armitage Baptist Church,
Chicago, Illinois
charles.lyons@armitagechurch.org

