

life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (v. 25), that the application is much wider. These words apply to any follower of Jesus, to any collection of followers of Jesus. These words apply to the church. Unless a congregation dies, it cannot bear fruit. Only when a congregation dies does it realize that all the planting and all the watering are just so much planting and watering without the action of God giving the increase. The congregation cannot give itself life, cannot make growth happen, and cannot stem the slide to death. The ability to do all of those things belongs to God alone.

As it claims for itself the title “the body of Christ,” the church declares its willingness to live out the paradigm established by Jesus, whose example was one that included death, even death on a cross. The church must therefore humble itself to the point of death, and then and only then will it find itself raised to life by the power of God. This death is not to be feared, for the church serves a God who knows the way out of the tomb. Death is a strange way to build success, but God’s ways are not our ways. As the local community of faith gathers, takes up its cross, and dies, the power of God is revealed in the raising of the congregation to life again.

church to do and to be may require the leaders to surrender their vision and their expectations so that God's gift of new life can be revealed. As leaders are prepared to renounce their goals and dreams so that God's vision can be seen, congregational members will be more willing to let go of the things they are holding onto that are blocking the new life of resurrection.

Congregations that know death and rebirth are part of God's plan ask, "Where in the life of the congregation are there signs of death? Where do we see the denial, anger, bargaining, and despair that accompany the dying process?" These are areas to pay attention to, because they may be the areas where new life will bloom. Precisely in those places where death has taken hold is the hope of renewal the greatest. In the stone-cold tomb, death had taken hold, yet the empty tomb stands as the boldest sign of God's action.

In dying and in being born to new life, the local community of faith finds its story connecting to the larger story of God's action in the world. The power at work to raise Jesus from the dead is revealed anew as congregations are raised from death to life. By the grace of God, the community of faith is given reason to hope in even the most difficult of circumstances, to trust in a God who knows how to get congregations out of the grave.