

It was a familiar story. A nice person like me, with much work to do, trapped on a four hour flight from Denver to Durham, seated next to someone who was determined to set me straight before we landed. Where does American Airlines get these people, I wondered. Hardly had our wheels left the ground in Denver and she informed me, proudly, that she was returning from a wellness convention. "You dig, you dig wells?" I asked cutely. Like many of my attempts at humor, that was a big mistake. I was informed that she was totally in touch with her body, that she had, this year alone, added at least four years to her life since getting off red meat and on to lentil casseroles. When the steward brought us our in-flight meal, she rejected both the chicken almandine and the beef burgundy. "What they do to chickens is positively obscene," she said to me. And then she asked for bottled water and when none could be found she started glaring at me as I ate my meal as if I were someone sniffing cocaine. "You really ought to do something about your weight," she advised. "I can tell by the gray in your hair you're weak in B- compounds." Why is God, or at least American Airlines, punishing me, I groaned. But more than that, I couldn't help wondering, whatever happened to the old fashioned way of achieving immortality. The Greeks, when they wanted to live on and on, had children. The Egyptians had embalmers. But we have our oat bran and yogurt and wheat germ and aerobics. This person with her evangelistic wellness had just taken six years off of my life. Now, without question, we can all agree that there is much to be said for good health. But I tell you, it has gone quite beyond that. We're not talking about simply looking fit, or feeling a bit better. We're talking immortality here, people. The impression is given that if we just avoid tap water, nuclear power stations, chemically dependent physicians, and with a little help from an artificial organ or two, dying is absolutely pointless. What's needed is to reduce living to zero risk. Marvin Hage has called my attention to an April 1977 issue of "Science." It seems that there is a whole new field of science called risk-assessment analysis. An article by Richard Watson and EAC Crouch offers a comparative listing of the various risk that one is apt to be exposed to in life. For instance, people in police work have a  $2 \times 10$  to the 4th power annual risk of death or (AR). Before you drop off the police force, though, it turns out that driving a motor vehicle anywhere has exactly the same AR. I was pleased to see that being a frequent flyer is safer five to the tenth of a fifth power AR than riding in an automobile, even when you factor in the risk of getting a seat next to a person who's into wellness. Surprise to me, switching from ordinary tap water, six times ten to the seventh power AR, switching from ordinary city water to the contaminated well water of Silicon Valley that has the E.P.A. so upset actually lowers my risk factor by a factor of three hundred. It turns out that the potassium in my body gives me fifteen hundred times the radiation of the atmosphere within twenty miles of a nuclear power plant. But don't stay home because it turns out that household hazards are about fifty percent as likely to kill you as the AR of driving your car on the Durham freeway. Food, any kind of food, especially aflatoxin-laced peanut butter, turns out to be hazardous. Why? Well, apparently, theorizes Dr Bruce Ames, plants are deadly because they learn through evolution that chemical warfare is a great way to fight off fungi and insects and animal predators, unfortunately, this includes human predators. In other words, the salad bar can kill you. Now how did we get here? How did we get here with our risk assessment analysis and our wellness? Well, I think it can be argued that victory over mortality is the goal of modern science, beginning as early as Bacon and Decartes. Bacon called for, quote, "The conquest of nature and the relief of man's estate." When one reads Bacon on science, it becomes evident that the relief he sought was chiefly relief

from death. Bacon, in fact, may have been immortality research's first victim. He apparently died while conducting freezing experiments on a chicken. Descartes called for modern philosophy to reject the abstract speculation that had characterized earlier philosophy in favor of a new practical philosophy, by which we would, in the words of Descartes "render ourselves as masters and possessors of nature because this project brings about the preservation of health, which is without doubt the chief blessing and the foundation of all other blessings in life." In other words, Descartes said, when you've got your health, you've got everything that's worth having in life. Behind this great project of science begun in Bacon and Descartes was the belief that we actually held in our little human hands the conquering of mortality. That life can be lived without risk, without limits through solely human effort. Death is pointless, a hindrance, to the reaching of our full human potential. Now, this is quite different for us, particularly us Christians. In the Middle Ages, there was a vast literature called the "ars moriendi," the "art of dying" literature. In fact, it was alleged that this was a major purpose of the Christian faith, to teach you how to die well. John Wesley boasted of his Methodists, "Our people know how to die well." But now, you see, we'd like not to die at all. Duke historian David Steinmetz notes that in the Middle Ages, cancer was the death of choice. Cancer, unlike a sword through the skull or a heart attack, gave one the opportunity to die well, to get your affairs in order to pay off old debts, to bless the grandchildren. But now, it's interesting that most of us pray for a quick, instant death. In other words so we can die without knowing that we're doing it, because, it turns out, that we modern people have absolutely nothing to do with our dying. Of course, statistical chances are that most of us will not die quickly. And so we at least hope for a drugged death so we won't have to come to terms with a hard cold fact that this is, despite oat bran and jogging, it. The most enduring task of any religion, I think, is to teach us to die well. St. Paul might say that it's the whole point of the Christian religion. Because if I knew how to die, I might know how to live. A Princeton student, being interviewed by a reporter after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, was asked about the prospect of sending American troops there. "There is nothing worth dying for," he said, which means, of course, the facts being what they are, that one day, he shall have the unpleasant task of dying for nothing. For the cruel truth is that despite our wellness and risk assessment analysis and the good works of Ralph Nader, nobody has come up with a surefire way to make me live forever. I will, you will die. So we might as well get on with the only really pressing business there is in such terminal circumstances: figuring out how one might die well. If religion can help with that, it's ultimately interesting; if it can't, it's as bland and boring as a bowl of wet cold oat bran. Now, for those who expect to be saved by Jesus rather than by eating well, risk avoidance cannot be the name of the game. I mean what would you calculate to be the AR, the annual risk, of a Saint Paul or a Teresa of Calcutta or a Martin Luther King. No, the story by which they lived, and which we are called to live by and die by, is one of risk confronted, death embraced. Jesus calls us to walk a narrow way, to take up a cross daily, and that's terribly risky business. Ask that bright company of martyr, martyrs, who stare down at us from the Duke chapel windows, those who quite recklessly parted with goods, and security, and then life itself, preferring to be faithful in death, rather than safe in life. But, of course, it's also terribly adventuresome and terribly invigorating. We are, in a world with nothing better to do than cling to life, we are, as his disciples, given something interesting to do with our dying, and therefore with our living. Today's epistle comes toward the end of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Paul speaks, here at the end of his letter and perhaps at the end of his own life, of death and hope for life after death. Some in Corinth, it turns out, were saying that there is no resurrection of the dead, Death, in other words, has no meaning because it is a complete dead end. As they say, when you're dead, you're dead. That's it, C'est finis. Paul says that if that's so, if Christ is not raised

and we are not raised, then nothing makes a lot of difference anyway. Sure, 1989 Durham is okay and my being 43 this year isn't the total end of the world, but Paul would argue that if this is it, then this is the end of the road. Or as Paul put it, "if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, then we of all people are most to be pitied." It's all in vain. Now note that Paul does not argue for some immortality of the soul, the return of the robin in the spring, the springing up of the crocus in April, or some notion that there is some immortal spark in us that just goes on and on despite our death. Rather, he argues for Christ's defeat of death. The Christian faith asserts that, in Christ, God has triumphed. But if death is not defeated, we are to be pitied, because our Christian claims of the triumph of God over all affairs of life are but hollow assertion. If this Savior cannot do something about our dying, Paul would say, he really isn't much of a Savior. Our claim is that Christ has beaten the great enemy. In Christ, therefore, our lives begin to make a difference. Because we are free to live as those who share in his victory over death, which means today that we need not anxiously cling to our lives as if the only important aspect in life were this life. Our lives have significance not in their duration or longevity, but in their fidelity to the one who has taken the sting out of death. For instance, Christian nonviolence is based not on the assumption that if we are nice to people, people, even our enemies, will turn and be nice to us. But rather it is based on the conviction that no one, not even our enemies, can determine the end of our lives. 45 years ago, last month, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hung by the Nazis. Bonhoeffer had lived a charmed and aristocratic existence up to that point. How had life brought him here to Flossenburg prison, condemned as a traitor, hung? Of course, when Hitler came to power in Germany, Bonhoeffer could have done as many of his country men and tried to work out some compromise, tried to prolong his life, tried to give significance to his life as a collaborator. He chose another way out of his Christian conviction. This enabled Pastor Bonhoeffer to walk to his death with head held high, commenting to another prisoner as he was taken from his cell, "This is the end. But for me, it is yet the beginning with God." My point is that we are at our worst when we vainly act as if it were up to us alone to make sense out of our lives, to give our brief days significance by our efforts, because fearful, frightened, anxiety-ridden creatures are victims of death rather than its victors. With our pills, and our yogurt, and our fears of mortality, we haven't conquered death, death has conquered us. But as Paul says, "thanks be to God who gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." As Christians, we don't have to be hung up on death, anxiously managing or guarding our lives, as if death were the worst that life could do to us. The worst that life could do to us is to render us unfaithful to Christ, to put our lust for control, our lives about our true human condition, our anxious desire for self-preservation, before our desire to be faithful disciples, to base our lives, either upon our achievement or our delusions, rather than upon his victory. And so Paul says to the congregation at Corinth, "Therefore beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, be immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing what the world does not know, knowing that in the Lord, your labor, your life, is not in vain. Amen."