

The Good News is Alive in the World (Easter Sunday)

Prayer of Illumination

Holy One,
all over the world, people are gathering to hear the same story.
All over the world, people are gathering to hear how death lost its sting.
All over the world, people are gathering together, praying for a glimpse of you.
So like our neighbors all over the world, we pray, be here.
Speak to us today.
Soften the calloused parts of our hearts
until we can sense your Holy Spirit in our midst once more.
With eagerness and hope, we run to the tomb.
We sing alleluia. We bow our heads. We listen for you. Amen.

Matthew 28:1-10

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

The Good News is Alive in the World

I don't remember anyone in seminary telling me how many dead people I would end up knowing. Maybe someone did. Probably it should have been obvious. But this year I find myself more and more aware that if I keep at this pastoring thing long enough, eventually I am going to know more dead people than live ones.

For every funeral I attend or officiate, I take a funeral card. You know the ones I'm talking about: they have a picture of the deceased on them with the dates of their life and sometimes a quote or the date of the funeral. Not everyone has one, sometimes I don't get one before

they're gone. But I do my best. And when I get back to my office, I tuck the funeral card on top of the last one I got in the corner of the bulletin board above my desk. Sometimes they pile up quickly and I only see someone's photo for a week or two before another sits on top of it. But other times there will be one face that stares out at me for months.

And then I stand up here on Sundays and I look out and I see the people who are missing. Phyllis Wilson who always sat right there and would hold my hand when we sang the Lord's Prayer and whose homemade paper still shows up in projects I make. Mary Manning who sat in the back and matched my snark with snark of her own in a way that made us both laugh. Carlo Henningsen who sat over there and would always tell me he was good before telling me how he was actually feeling. Frank and Florence Bogynos who sat back there and who I suspect will forever be for me the picture of commitment and marriage done well. Margaret Adler who sat there and would hold your hand in both of hers when she shook it. Margaret Kovach who had a sparkle in her eye that made you just know she was someone you'd like. Jim Parrish who managed the church's money for a lifetime and was one of the most generous people I've ever met. Darrell Bohn who, in the new member class he attended, when he heard that Jenny and I alternate preaching every other week said he wanted to join the church because he loved the preaching ... every other week. There are more.

And there are the people I never knew and the ones who never sat in these pews. The brother you lost, the son who died, the sister who passed, the parent who died when you were young, the baby who didn't survive. There are moments when life feels dense with loss. The everyday ones as the children who used to giggle and blow kisses now drive and send their love with emojis on texts; the surprising ones when a relationship ends before you expected it to; the unimaginable ones when a child dies; the ones that reorganize everything when a partner or a parent passes.

The women who went to the tomb that first Easter morning went to see. Matthew uses a particular Greek word for what they were doing. It's not a casual glance; it's the kind of watching you do when you believe that what you are looking at matters, even if you can't say why. It's the same word Matthew uses when the women see the crucifixion. It is to behold, to witness. It is how you watch a newborn baby, how you sit with someone who is dying.

The women come to the tomb to bear witness to the loss they have endured, the loss they are enduring. They come because they have been coming all along. These are women who have been following Jesus. They were there when Jesus taught and healed. They were there when Jesus was crucified on the cross, they were there when his body was laid in a tomb, and now, at the earliest possible opportunity, they are there again. They are at the tomb because that is what love does.

Love shows up. It shows up at the bedside when the final breaths are escaping, it shows up at the graveside when the body of a beloved is laid to rest, and it continues to show up where

memories linger—in photographs and stories, in songs that carry us back, in the pews of the church where they used to sit.

And so, the women show up. And when they do, the ground shakes. The ground shakes and an angel descends and I can't help but picture what I can only hope will one day be a Broadway version of this scene as an angel descends and perches, legs crossed primly, on the rock as if to say, "what, this? This little rock was what was supposed to stop God?"

The women show up because that's what love does. And when they show up, the ground beneath them rumbles and the world as they know it breaks apart. Because that's what resurrection does. It destabilizes the ground beneath our feet. Resurrection looks at the systems and structures, the stones and boulders that the world, the empire, the state, our own emotions have put in place in an attempt to control and contain God and it rolls them right out of the way. The women don't do that. We don't even know if their presence is what caused it or if it would have happened regardless.

What we do know is that because they were there, they saw it. They saw the stone rolled back. They saw the angel descend and perch, glowing, on the stone. They saw the guards faint. And they saw the empty tomb. They heard the angel say, do not be afraid. They heard the angel give voice to a hope they had almost let go of. They heard the angel tell them to go. And so they went. They went and they encountered Jesus on the road. In the middle of their confusion and their hope, their grief and their terror, they met Jesus.

I think that's still how it happens.

Someone shared with me that in the first winter after their child died, they were walking in their yard with their baby granddaughter when they found a mourning dove nesting in the hollow of a dead tree with two young babies tucked in beside it. It was God, they said. In that moment. In that grief. Life, nesting in the midst of death.

Mourning doves aren't meant to nest and give birth in Wisconsin winters. They can, they do, but it's rare. And yet. New life sitting in the middle of a dead tree.

That's Easter. It's not a denial of death—people die. It's not an erasure of grief—grief is real and it can empty us out. The women knew that as well as anyone. They saw Jesus die. Saw him tortured. Saw him give up his last breath. They came to the graveyard that morning carrying the weight of that grief, the weight of that loss. After all, Rome was very good at killing things. The empire knew how to roll a stone into place and station guards in front of it. It had a lot of practice squashing anything that went against it. And yet.

And yet, that stone rolled right out of the way. Because love cannot be killed.

Love remains. That's the Easter claim. Love remains. Not as consolation. Not as a way of making the loss smaller, or the cruelty less real, or the world less frightening than it is. But as fact about the nature of reality—the most stubborn fact there is. God is love, and so love is what persists. Love is what persists when death tries to have the final word. Love is what persists when hate wants to tear the world apart. Love is what persists when hope feels in short supply—and there are days when hope feels like a luxury we have long since given up on.

Because the hate we see displayed on the news and in the words of people we know is real. The fear is real. The trauma is real. And yet, love is bigger. Love brings us together—to take casseroles to those who are grieving. To sit with those who are lost. To provide for those who cannot provide for themselves. To welcome the immigrants in our midst. To find our way forward from this place, together—because even the people who seem most defined by cruelty and hatred love someone. Are loved by someone.

Love is the foundation. It was there when the stone was rolled into place. It was there when the ground shook. It is still nesting in the hollow of every dead thing, waiting to be seen by anyone paying close enough attention.

The women met Jesus on the road. In the middle of their running, in the middle of their fear and their astonishment, in the middle of their not-yet-quite-believing, Love found them. Because Love cannot be contained. And Love said to them, Love still says to us: do not be afraid. Go. Tell.

Amen.