

Sermon for 4-21-19 -- Easter Sunday!
Luke 24:1-12; Psalm 118
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Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other unnamed women with them -- friends and followers of Jesus -- they learned from him, were healed by him, supported him, believed in him. On Friday, as they watched him bleed and die, they prayed and screamed and wept. On Saturday, they sat in shock and silence and disbelief. Early Sunday morning, just as soon as there was enough light in the sky to find their way, they went together to his tomb. They brought fragrant spices and oils. They were ready to enter the tomb of their friend, their teacher, their beloved Savior, kneel beside his battered body, pray and anoint and bless his degraded flesh with their gentle hands and quiet tears. As gut-wrenching and painful as that would be, they were ready to do it for him. But when they reached the tomb, they did not find what they expected.

*There is a sound of exultation and victory in the tents of the righteous:
The right hand of the Lord has triumphed!
The right hand of the Lord is exalted!
The right hand of the Lord has triumphed!*

*This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.
On this day the Lord has acted; we will rejoice and be glad in it.ⁱ*

We too know grief and sorrow and despair, you and me. We know how it feels to lose, to watch our hopes and dreams shatter in a moment. We know failure. We have been shamed and humiliated. We have cried until our eyes dried up for lack of tears. We have stood by and watched as devastation takes its toll, knowing we are powerless to change the painful outcome.

We know how it feels, and we've lived it -- when the people we love most suffer, and die; when our churches and temples and mosques are shot up, or burned; when it seems that all the goodness and faith and beauty and decency in the world is being snuffed out, bit by bit, and we can see it happening but we cannot make it stop...

Always things are burning and dying. Always the powers of greed and fear and destruction rear their ugly heads and threaten that which is gentle, and kind, and loving, and generous. And yet, always, God is there.

Perhaps you watched on TV or online as a glorious cathedral burned during Holy Week. Perhaps you prayed or cried (or did both) as you saw crowds of Parisians kneeling on the pavement outside Notre Dame, singing hymns and clutching rosaries. Perhaps you wondered why we cannot muster the same level of sympathy for starving children and desperate refugees that we feel for a building - a beautiful, historic, holy building, yes; but still a building. And perhaps, if you're a real cynic, you considered that watching the destruction of this majestic cathedral being narrated live on every network (interrupted by brief but necessary commercial breaks) seemed like a perfect metaphor for the state of the church, or our nation, or the world today. Look at all that we've made, the best of our past, crumbling before our very eyes! Nothing will ever be the same!

Why do you look for the living among the dead?ⁱⁱ

Why do we look to the past and expect to find the future?

Good Friday is real. Crucifixion and death are real. Holy Saturday and grief and pain and devastation are real. **But so is Resurrection.** Always things are burning and dying; and always there is new life and new light to come. Always there is new birth and hope and promise.

We have to stop living like we believe in Good Friday and Holy Saturday but not in Easter Sunday.

Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.ⁱⁱⁱ

On Tuesday morning, when the smoke cleared and the ashes settled in Paris, we saw the first glimpses of Notre Dame after the fire. I was struck by the image of the empty cross, surrounded by dirt and debris, still standing tall in the new day. I was struck by the effect of the missing ceiling -- with the roof completely gone, bright beams of heavenly sunlight illuminated the nave, some shining through the miraculously preserved Rose Window. And most of all, I was struck upon learning that the fragile copper sculptures of the disciples had been removed from the cathedral's spire just four days before the fire, as part of the ongoing restoration work.^{iv}

How ironic... of all four Gospels, only John gives any indication that the disciples were present during the crucifixion (and even then he only mentions the Beloved Disciple -- aka, himself). It seems the disciples were not there when Jesus died on the cross, just as they were not there on the spire of Notre Dame as the great cathedral burned. Nor were the disciples there to discover the empty tomb at dawn on the third day. [To be fair, Peter came as soon as he heard the news from the women.]

For whatever reason, the 11 remaining disciples **were not there** on Easter morning. They did not rise before the sun to go with the women. They were not prepared to visit the "Ground Zero" of their pain. They were not ready to bear witness to brokenness and loss. And we can't blame them for turning away, because we know how difficult it is to face our collective demons.

But Easter reminds us that, whether we find ourselves in the midst of Good Friday's grief and despair, or Holy Saturday's shock and silence, we must remember that dawn on the third day is coming. We must trust in the dawn, look toward the dawn, prepare for the dawn. Easter is our eternal promise, our guarantee that no matter how long the night, the dawn will always come.

My friend Julie, who's a pastor in Michigan, told me a story about her visit to the Holy Land in January. She was touring the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, which contains a spectacular, high, gilded altar that stands over what's traditionally believed to be Calvary -- the site of the crucifixion. Pilgrims from all over the world line up for a chance to kneel under the altar and touch a large boulder known as the Rock of Calvary, an exposed piece of the earth on which Jesus died. While Julie was waiting, she noticed a little girl in the line ahead of her, who seemed out of place amongst all the dignified religious types. When she got to the front of the line, the little girl mustered all her strength and youthful flexibility to crawl under the altar and climb directly onto the rock. She sat atop the rock, spread out her skirt around her, and giggled joyously -- until an angry priest rushed over to chastise her.

Perhaps that silly little girl understands Easter better than any of us. Perhaps she knows that Good Friday was not the end of the story. Perhaps she knows that the powers of evil did their best, and it was no match for the wellspring of life. Perhaps she knows the true greatness of God, who transformed the cross of death into an empty relic of false power and the tomb of Jesus into the birthplace of a new era.

No longer will evil and death have the last laugh. Christ has died, yes, but Christ is risen, and the sun peeks over the horizon. Dawn is coming. ALLELUIA! Amen.

ⁱ Psalm 118:15-16, 23-24

ⁱⁱ Luke 24:5

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 24:6-7

^{iv} from the *New York Times*: "A Miracle of Timing: The Statues That Escaped the Notre-Dame Fire" by Doreen Carvajal (4-16-19).