

April 24, 2011

Lamentations 3:19-25

John 20:1-18

“Why are you weeping?”

This is Easter Sunday. This is a day of joy, the greatest joy the world has ever known! Then why does the sermon title include the word “weeping”? Well, because Easter BEGINS with weeping. The followers and friends of Jesus are plunged into anguish at his death. They are filled with the deepest sorrow they’ve ever known.

Sorrow and tears are known to us all. In the Grand Sweep of reading the entire Bible in one year, we finished up the book of the prophet Jeremiah this past week. Jeremiah was known as the “weeping prophet”. His heart was broken by the stubborn resistance of his people. He warned them that their faithlessness would end in disaster. And it did. The nation was conquered by Babylon, and the people were taken into exile.

Next we began the book of Lamentations. Tradition says it was written by Jeremiah, after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. We can picture a lonely man standing on one of the mountains outside the city, surveying the desolation and ruin, trying to find some consolation in the ashes of despair. Words of lament pour from his lips. Then, in the midst of the cries of agony, the writer suddenly announces that something has come to his mind, “and therefore I have hope.” (Lamentations 3:21)

*The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,
His mercies never come to an end;
They are new every morning;
Great is your faithfulness.
“The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,
“therefore I will hope in him.”*

Sorrow and tears are known to us all. This morning we remember those who went to the tomb that first Easter morning. We remember how Mary Magdalene stood weeping outside that empty tomb, plunged into despair, unable to carry out her last gestures of love, to cleanse and anoint Jesus’ battered body.

Have you been to the tomb? “Come on,” you may say, “What are you talking about? That was thousands of years ago! We hear the story year after year; we tell and re-tell it. It’s vital to our faith to know it, to believe it, to embrace it, to proclaim it, but WE weren’t there!”

“Come on,” I say to you. “Haven’t you been to the tomb? Have you made a journey where all that seemed so full of hope and promise has died?”

Have you walked to your car in the nursing home parking lot after visiting your mother, blinded by tears as you realize she doesn’t recognize you anymore?

Have you gone through the empty farmhouse after the auction, hearing your footsteps echo on the bare floors, tears falling silently as you realize there was no way to keep the farm—it wasn’t really your fault. Still, the kids and your wife wait in the truck with such big, sad eyes, and you feel guilty.

Have you been to the tomb? Have you driven to the hospital, or police station on a dark night after a phone call about a son or daughter, or a sister or brother, or a husband or wife, your heart saying, “No. no. no,” over and over?

Have you been to the tomb? Have you made the journey numb and empty? Have you sat in the lawyer’s office, words sweeping past you like foggy mist as you discuss the terms of the divorce? Have you sat in the doctor’s office as the diagnosis is given with too many syllables? Have you sat in your quiet kitchen alone, not able to believe he’s really gone?

My friends, Mary Magdalene wept at the tomb. And we too have made that journey, where every step taken cries out, “All is lost, all is lost, there is no hope; this is the end of the story.”

But it isn’t the end of the story. Mary wept, but a figure appeared beside her. Blinded by her tears, she thought he was the gardener and begged him to help her locate Jesus’ body. But instead, she heard her name called by a familiar voice. She turned, recognized Jesus, and breathed, “Teacher!” He told her not to cling to him, but to run and tell the others what she has seen. Filled with new hope and dawning joy she hurried away.

Have you been to the tomb? Have you received surprising news of life where you were sure there could only be death; news of hope when there seemed only despair?

You return to the nursing home to visit your mother who no longer recognizes you. One week she presses a small crocheted blanket into your hands. “You give this to the baby,” she says. Baby? What baby? There hasn’t been a baby in the family for years. But months later, after your mother’s death, your son, who has been married and childless for nine years, calls with surprising news. He and his wife are expecting a new little arrival in six months. You hang up the phone, feeling a warm glow, and go to the closet where you find the little blanket. You wrap it tenderly and carefully in yellow tissue. “For the baby,” you write on the tag.

Have you been to the tomb, discovering life where you thought there would be death? You close the door to the farmhouse behind you and walk to the truck. Your twelve-year-old son jumps out of his seat. As he comes toward you, you notice he has a newspaper in his hand. He holds it out to you. Circled in pencil is an announcement about a special program for job re-training being held at the local community college. “Dad,” whispers the boy, “I can help. I can mow lawns this summer, and shovel snow through the winter.” Without words you hug him and walk to join the family.

Have you encountered hope in the midst of despair? A friend is there at the police station; he got a call from your neighbor and came out in the middle of the night. After the divorce is final a woman from your church invites you to go with her to a support group she’s been attending for the past year.

Healing begins, new friends are made, flowers grow in the garden.

We have been to the tomb. We have heard words of promise, that all is NEVER lost. Jesus told Mary to share the news that Christ was alive, soon to ascend to be with their God forevermore.

Our Easter God surprises us with his appearance in the commonplace. He surprises us as he appears—looking like a gardener; ALIVE rather than dead; popping up in surprising turns to our life stories. He surprised the disciples by appearing (in John 20:19) in a room where they were gathered; a room with a locked door!

Harry Houdini, the famous escape artist, issued a challenge wherever he went. He could be locked in any jail cell in the country, he claimed, and set himself free in short order. He managed this many times, but once something went wrong. Houdini entered the jail in his street clothes and the heavy metal doors clanged shut behind him. From his belt he took a concealed piece of metal, strong and flexible. He set to work, but something seemed to be unusual about this lock. For thirty minutes he worked and got nowhere. An hour passed, and he still had not opened the door. By now he was bathed in sweat and panting in exasperation, but he still couldn't pick the lock. Finally, after two hours, Houdini collapsed in frustration and failure against the door he could not unlock. But when he fell against the door, it swung open! IT HAD NEVER BEEN LOCKED AT ALL! But in his mind it was locked, and that was all it took to keep him from opening the door and walking out of the jail cell.

On this Easter Sunday we proclaim that:

-Trust in God gives us a whole new framework for understanding life and coping with its disasters;

-God brings Easter hope to all who anguish;

-SIN and DEATH cannot imprison us;

-Our God of forgiveness and new life has opened the door.

And as he did with Mary Magdalene, Jesus asks us to share this good news. Hallelujah! Christ is risen! He has turned ALL death to LIFE!