

Looking for Life
Easter Sunday
April 8, 2007

The women were ready when the first light showed in the sky,
ending the Sabbath's rest.

They began their walk to the tomb where Jesus had been laid –
Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and the other women.
They carried the burial spices.

They carried also the grief and the love they had for this man
who had embraced them, respected them, encouraged them,
called them into life,
called them into ministry with him.

They still reeled from the brutality of his death.

They ached with feelings of helplessness
in the face of the Empire's power.

They lived with fear that others of their group
could be tracked and arrested.

But still, they readied themselves for the first light;
readied themselves to care for Jesus' body.

There are times in our lives

when death strikes and we ready ourselves to go to the graveyard.

We sing hymns and say prayers and tell stories.

We carry with us photographs and memories.

We put our arms around one another in support.

Death changes us and challenges us.

Like the women who walk to the grave that Sunday morning,
we know what it is to walk to the cemeteries of this world –
places where we bury dreams,
places where we bury love,
places where we bury hope.

About two years ago,
my marriage ended.

In the months leading up to our decision
and in the year that followed

I reeled with an avalanche of emotion and heartache.

I carried on with life because my children needed me
and with work because I needed it – I needed you.

When I read someone who writes from a wheelchair because
of a spinal cancer that almost killed him, his words resonated with me:

“When you undergo huge traumas in middle life,
everybody is in league with us to deny that the old life is ended.

Everybody is trying to patch us up and get us back

to who we were, when in fact
what we need to be told is, You're dead.
Who are you going to be tomorrow?"
Who I was died when my marriage ended.
For a long time I have wandered in the place where my dreams were buried.

For Alex, who writes a blog on Wondercafe,
the graveyard of buried hopes and dreams
was a very real place.

When I was 32, things were bad in my life, my partner was dead, my friends had all died, I was estranged from my family and my church. I was all alone. (just me and my God, or my imaginary friend, as I thought God might be) I was very sick, covered in radiation burns, going blind, and about to go into palliative care. I had a terminal disease that had killed millions, and all that medical science had to offer me was only a short extension on my life. But it offered no reason for me to live.

*There was no rational reason why I had enough hope to enter into a medical experiment of a new drug therapy.
All of my friends who had been in other medical experiments, had died as a result, or suffered greatly, and besides, when everyone in your life who you have loved and who has ever loved you is dead what reason is there to live?*

Like the women who walked to the tomb that morning
we know what it is to walk to the cemeteries of this world –
places where we bury dreams,
places where we bury love,
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On Wednesday, our Moderator, David Guilliano, General Secretary Nora Sanders and a few others from the United Church returned from spending ten days in Israel and Palestine. They went to be with our ecumenical partners as an expression of support. They went to see for themselves, to talk with people, to hear from Israelis and from Palestinians about what the occupation of Palestinian land and the more recent construction of a wall is doing to the everyday lives of people. Even as he walked in places where Jesus walked, joining in a Palm Sunday procession through Jerusalem, David was angered and saddened by today's injustice, hardship and fear. On day eight of the trip, they stayed in Bethlehem and David writes:

The birthplace of Jesus is a prison. We passed through the check-point in the wall surrounding the entire city of Bethlehem. Once a thriving business and tourist area, it is now completely cut off, and all but defeated by the 10 meter concrete wall. All traffic entering and leaving, especially leaving, is carefully screened by the Israeli military. Few Palestinians have the necessary papers. It has been disastrous to the local economy. We are the only guests staying at the International Centre, a large and beautiful conference facility.

In another post, he speaks of a restaurant where the names of the villages where Palestinian refugees used to live are displayed around the room.

Since 1947 they haven't been home
yet many people still hold onto the keys of their houses.
Year after year they raise children and now grandchildren
in refugee camps
that have become graveyards of hope.

Like the women who walked to the tomb that morning
we know what it is to walk to the cemeteries of this world –
places where we bury dreams,
places where we bury love,
places where we bury hope.

When Mary Magdalene and the others arrive at the burial place
they are astonished to find that the large stone has been rolled back
from the entrance to the tomb.

They go inside
but they can't find the body of Jesus.
What are they to make of this?
But before they can do anything,
they are greeted by two men, light cascading over them.
And the men ask a question:

“Why are you looking for the Living One in a cemetery?”

He is not here, but raised up.
Remember how he told you when you were still back in Galilee
that he had to be handed over to sinners, be killed on a cross,
and in three days rise up?”

The women leave quickly, going back to the disciples
with the news.

They told the story again and again
but the men were incredulous.

This couldn't possibly be.
But Peter ran to the tomb and found it empty
except for a few grave clothes. He walked away shaking his head.
What could it mean?

The thing is, when we go to cemeteries
we aren't looking for living ones.
Cemeteries are for the dead, may they rest in peace.
Cemeteries are the places where we bury what can live no more.

And that is the surprise of Easter:
God has given life where there was only death.
God raised Jesus and, with him, raised to new life
the many who loved and followed him.
The grave could not contain Jesus;
death could not hold him.
The rising turned tears of grief
into tears of gladness.
It would take time for this new reality to sink in –
it would take time for the community to realize,
deep in their souls, that death had been defeated
by the love of God,
by God's deep YES to the life of Jesus.
It would take time for them to experience
the presence of a living Christ walking with them
in new ways, to new places and with new purpose.
But gradually, gradually they would take into their hearts
the glad news.
And the question of angels would make sense:
Why **do** you look for the Living One in a cemetery?
Jesus had left the grave.
Jesus was out in the world, calling them to join him again.

Jesus is still out in the world.
And today he calls us to join him.
Death is real but so is life.
Despair is real but so is hope.
Loneliness is real but so is love.

When Alex was so ill that he couldn't imagine living,
it was Easter – Christ's suffering and the miracle of his resurrection
that gave Alex enough hope to try one more treatment.

The only thing that kept me going was hope.

***It is only because I had the example of other Christians, who continued to live in hope,
even after there were no rational reasons to do so, that I could live in hope.***

So for me, Easter just doesn't lead me to a new life, but it leads me to life itself.

In Palestine and Israel, our Moderator looked for signs of hope

in the graveyard of lost dreams.
He talked with Jewish and Arab women who worked together for peace,
saw families where children were encouraged to play
with one another across lines of religion.
He listened to the story of a rabbi who stood with a Palestinian child
held by Israeli soldiers in a confrontation.
He decided to make a gift to the United Church's commitment
to raise a million dollars for peace efforts in Palestine and Israel.

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As I was wandering in the graveyard of my dreams after my marriage ended,
I was joined – maybe they were angels
but they looked a lot like people in this congregation.
Some offered sympathy because they knew what it was to lose a spouse to death
and together we supported one another in learning to live alone.
Some offered me very private stories of difficult times in their relationships
and, in their telling, let me know they understood that marriage isn't always easy.
Some offered prayers, some hugs, some Kleenex when I cried.
And gradually, I began to realize,
as the women and men who loved Jesus did,
that I was being called back into life.
Barbara Brown Taylor, after she left her role as an Anglican priest, wrote:
“All the church and her members has ever needed to rise from the dead
is memory, bread, wine and Holy Spirit....”

It isn't much – memory, bread, wine and Holy Spirit –
but it is the difference between death and life.
The stories we tell, the memory of rising, call us deeper into life.
The love we feel calls us deeper into relationship with one another.
The One we love and who loves us
calls us away from cemeteries
and into the world to share Life with the world.

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