**While It Was Still Dark**

**John 20:1-18**

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 What a heartbreaking sight on Monday afternoon as we watched the iconic spire of Notre Dame Cathedral collapse in flames.  Though we live thousands of miles away, I think many of us feel some sense of connection to Notre Dame. Possibly because we have visited or wish we could.  Possibly because we understand her cultural and historical significance or appreciate her gothic beauty. Or possibly because, as Christians, she represents hundreds of years of our history. She is, as Pope Francis described her this week, “an architectural jewel of a collective memory”. Over 800 years old, Notre Dame has survived the end of the Middle Ages, the Reformation, the French Revolution, two world wars, and the destruction of the Nazis.  She has stood through lightning storms and snowstorms, through bombings and blackouts. She has graced the heart of Paris with her beauty, a sacred place filled with sacred relics and artwork testifying to Christian faith and human resilience.

 And so, our hearts were full of grief as we watched those flames light up the night sky.  Grief and an eerie sense that we were watching the destruction of something precious, something holy, as if in some way the evil in the world was destroying the good.

Of course, we were not alone in our grief.  At the same time as Notre Dame burned, the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, the third holiest site in Islam, was burning, as well.  And, in the weeks preceding, three black churches in the same parish in Louisiana were burned in hate crimes. I wonder if, as we watch these sacred places scarred or destroyed, we get just a tiny taste of how the disciples felt when Jesus was crucified.  After all, they watched the death of something precious, something holy, and witnessed as evil put love on a cross.

 We pick up the story in the Gospel of John with Mary Magdalene. Mary had travelled with Jesus and listened as he taught about kindness and compassion, justice and love.  She had witnessed and experienced his acceptance of outcasts and his healing of the sick. She was there as the crowds cheered for him on Palm Sunday and as they cried out to crucify him just a few days later.  She watched him carry the heavy, wooden cross on his way to Golgotha. And she had cried at his crucifixion, heartbroken to see his agony as his life slipped away.

Imagine the intensity of her grief.  He was her teacher and her Lord who had welcomed her, as no man ever had, an equal to the twelve disciples, worthy of his teaching.  He had treated her with respect and compassion – and planted the seeds of hope in her and so many others that God believed in her, in them, in their right to live in freedom and justice – out from under the oppressive hand of the Roman Empire, the judgment and critique of temple officials.  She believed that he could change their world, lead them to fulfill God’s vision for humanity, a vision of inclusiveness, justice and love.

 Then in less than twenty-four hours, he was gone.  Humiliated, whipped, and crucified. Her teacher, her one hope – hung on a cross like a common criminal.

And so, early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary got up, dressed herself, and slipped away to visit the tomb, her heart heavy with grief. We have all journeyed in the dark as Mary does, overcome with grief, loss, guilt, or fear.  We know that kind of pain. For some of us, it has come most recently with the actions of the 2019 United Methodist General Conference as the church reaffirmed and strengthened its exclusionary position on LGBTQ+ individuals in the church. We feel angry and betrayed as we grieve the church that was once at the forefront of social justice movements from abolishing slavery to supporting laborers to ordaining women.

For others among us, the darkness has come with the death of someone we love, or with a divorce, an illness or depression, guilt over a mistake we’ve made, grief over a relationship we’ve lost, addiction to drugs, alcohol, or sex.  Whatever has broken us, we have stood, like Mary outside the tomb, weeping in the dark.

Scripture tells us, while it was still dark, Mary made her way to his burial site.  While it was still dark, she held her hand to her chest trying to release the ache that grief creates. And while it was still dark, she found the stone rolled away and an empty tomb.

Because while it was still dark, God was creating a miracle - a messy, beautiful, joyous, astounding miracle.

And, of course, that is the Easter message for our lives and for our denomination, as well.  We may see only darkness, but while it is still dark, God is already at work. While it is still dark, God is healing our broken hearts.  While it is still dark, God is planting seeds of hope. While it is still dark, God is resurrecting and recreating, nourishing and nurturing, so something new can be born. In our hearts, in our lives, in our church.

“It happens to all of us," Nadia Bolz-Weber tells us. "God simply keeps reaching down into the dirt of humanity and resurrecting us from the graves we dig for ourselves through our violence, our lies, our selfishness, our arrogance, and our addictions. And God keeps loving us back to life over and over.”

When we lose someone we love, when our health fails, when our relationship with a family member or friend gets broken, when the church disappoints or disturbs us, God loves us back to life.  God is in the promise that death, illness, brokenness, injustice are not the end of the story. God is eternally in the movement of good, in the arc of justice, in the light that overcomes darkness, in the strength and power of love to heal and resurrect us.

That is what Easter is all about.  We are Easter people because we know God isn’t finished yet - God will continue to create new life, new hope, new beginnings, new light in the darkness.

Still, even after she sees the empty tomb, it takes a while before Mary realizes what is happening and recognizes Jesus standing with her.  Once she finally does, she must want with all her heart to hold onto him, to keep him there with her, to take him to the other disciples, to simply be with him.  Yet, he says, “No. Do not hold onto me”. Scholar Gregory Robbins explains this saying, “Her story and his, his experience and hers, cannot be anchored in the past.  Nor is it theirs alone. Instead, he calls her by name to announce to the disciples - and, by extension to all who would believe - a new creation, an unimaginable future.”

Sometimes, we look for healing and hope by holding onto the past or trying to recreate what once was. We sit day after day by the grave of our loved one or look up our ex-spouse on Facebook.  We revert to being kids again when with our parents or struggle as parents to let our children grow up. We try to recreate the glory days when every sanctuary was packed and every Christian went to church.

 Yet, what Jesus tells Mary is she can’t hold onto him.  Rather, he calls on her to move forward, to share the story, the joy, the hope, the promise that is resurrection.  She will be the witness to what God is doing. She and the other disciples will carry the promise of new creation out into the broken world.

And, of course, he calls on us to do the same.  We cannot hold onto the past. We cannot bring back what is gone.  Rather, as faithful followers of Christ, our call is to carry the light that is God out into the darkness.  We each have a vital role to play in being agents of God’s love, voices for justice, purveyors of peace, people who live our daily lives according to what Jesus taught.  Love one another as I love you. That is our work to do. That is our calling as Easter people in a divided, angry, frightened world.

Similarly, I believe this congregation has a vital role to play in this dark and challenging time in the United Methodist Church.  We know who we are. We passed our welcoming statement in 2007. We have seen the power of love at work in an inclusive congregation.  We have benefitted from the gifts and graces that our LGBTQ+ siblings bring to our church community. Our calling as a congregation is to continue to welcome and include all people who enter our doors, to be an example of an inclusive and faithful community,  even as we help to shape whatever new thing God is creating within or outside of the United Methodist Church. We have faith in the God of new creation. We have faith that love wins.

On Tuesday morning, many of us woke wondering what was left of Notre Dame.  Had the whole cathedral burned to the ground? Were the relics and the artwork destroyed?  Through the wonders of social media, we got to see the first haunting pictures taken inside the sanctuary as the fire died down.  The cathedral was badly damaged - the roof gone, charred timber and rubble lay piled at the foot of the altar. Yet, there in the chancel, out of the fallen beams and soot and ash, rose the Notre Dame chancel cross.  Behind the altar, above the stunning pieta, it stands out in the photos, bright, golden, and shining - an emblem of Christ’s victory over human evil, of light overcoming darkness, of love defeating hate.

That is what we celebrate this day. The God of love loves us into new life - over and over again.  And nothing, and I mean nothing, not fire nor death nor crucifixion nor loss nor grief nor General Conference, nothing will stop God’s resurrection work in the world. Jesus Christ is risen, and we, who rise out of the ashes of our losses and defeats, are made new by the God of goodness and love so we can bear that love to the world. While it was still dark, God created a miracle.

Thanks be to God!