

This past Holy Week has been particularly poignant as we too, waited and prayed with a mother. Sunday we held in prayer Earl Wright and Scott Plummer. Tonight I ask you to hold Donna and her family in your hearts and prayers.

Gone From My Sight

I am standing upon the seashore. A ship at my side spreads her white sail to the morning breeze and starts for the blue ocean. She is an object of beauty and strength. I stand and watch her until at length she hangs like a speck of white cloud just where the sea and sky come to mingle with each other.

Then someone at my side says: "There, she is gone!"

"Gone where?"

Gone from my sight. That is all. She is just as large in mast and hull and spar as she was when she left my side

and she is just as able to bear her load of living freight to her destined port.

Her diminished size is in me, not in her.

And just at the moment when someone at my side says: "There, she is gone!" there are other eyes watching her coming,

and other voices ready to take up the glad shout": "Here she comes!"

And that is dying.

-Henry Van Dyke

We concluded the first person narratives of Holy Week with the story of Joanna, one of the women at the tomb. A story that in our faith gives us hope.

We were blessed with beautiful music as always from Carolyn and the choir with the wonderful additions of Lori Wright on the guitar and the new Union Church Bell Ringers! Thank you to all!

HEBREW SCRIPTURE Isaiah 65:17-25

Don Maunz

NEW TESTAMENT Acts 10:34-43

Savhana Hood

MESSAGE *Joanna* by Rev. Sarah Foulger (Luke 24:1-12) Pastor Beth Hood

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?" That is the most important question I have ever been asked. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" It was the question of the morning, that first Easter morning. But, without being aware of it, before that question was ever spoken aloud, I think I was fervently searching for an answer to it. You see, I lived in the court of Herod the King. My husband, Chuza, was Herod's steward.

To be in the court of Herod is to have everything while having nothing. It is to be surrounded by silk and fine wines and soft beds and fresh fruit and anything the eye desires. But it is to be empty of the things most desired by the heart and most longed for by the soul. To be in the court of Herod the king is also to witness the basest of human behavior. It is to become part of a culture of lies and manipulations and sometimes, unimaginable brutality.

The things Herod did were horrifically cruel and callous. He stole his brother's wife. He beheaded John the baptizer for no reason at all and then he went after Jesus. He seemed not to care for human life and for all his wealth and power, he was easily threatened. I tell you, Herod was deranged and dangerous. I don't know how Chuza worked for him as long as he did.

When I met Jesus I saw clearly how shallow and unsatisfying and contemptible that life truly was. It is the difference between sowing seeds among thorns and sowing seed on fertile earth. Sometimes you don't realize how awful your situation is until someone shows you what it could be. Some say I was courageous to leave all that behind and follow Jesus but I tell you, I was suffocating and did not know it. You see what I mean now when I tell you I had been looking for the living among the dead. When I met Jesus I felt I could breathe again. He said, "What good does it do to acquire the whole world and lose yourself?" He also said, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back, is fit for God's Kingdom." And so, without looking back, I became a disciple and a supporter. I was happy to help provide for Jesus, to take some of the profit of Herod's corrupt kingdom and apply it to the kingdom of heaven.

What an honor it was to be so close to all that happened within a brief but fertile span of time. The gifts Jesus brought into this world were astonishing: the healing he brought to so many, including me, the encouragement he offered to those who were desperate for good news, the words of life he spoke to a world obsessed with death, the song of hope he sang to a disheartened people.

But for me, the most important gift Jesus brought was a pathway to God, an experience of the love of God. No religious or moral code can replace a living relationship with our gracious God. In my family, we sometimes talked about God. We tried to live in ways that were respectful of God's laws. But, until I met Jesus I didn't realize that God is with me at all times. God is with us now. Indeed, we are surrounded by God's gracious presence.

The other amazing benefit of becoming a disciple of Jesus is the community of love, the family of faith that comes with the job. The friendships I gained were like no others. Susanna, Mary Magdalene, and I became quite close. We traveled with Jesus throughout the towns and villages of Galilee as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God. It was so exciting. Miracles bloomed before us every day like sweet blossoms on an almond tree. Love swept over the countryside with the fragrances of his words and his work. I was grateful to be a part of such a movement.

For it to end in such shame and disgrace and suffering was painful beyond my ability to describe. But, seeing what I have seen of the viciousness of human beings, I was not surprised. Others of the disciples were shocked when Jesus was arrested and tormented and murdered. I was bereft, thoroughly heartbroken but I was not shocked that it happened. Others wept uncontrollably at the horror of it but I did not. I was too angry. Traveling with Jesus, I witnessed so much pain that is unavoidable, the pain of sickness and injury and aging. Why is it some people are not content with the suffering that is inevitable and feel they must inflict a greater suffering? Does it make them feel more powerful? Did any of those who participated find fulfillment in torturing Jesus? Oh, I was angry.

When it was finished and Jesus had been laid to rest in a nearby tomb, Mary and I, along with a few other friends, did what women do. We took care of the business at hand which was to prepare his dead body. We gathered spices, myrrh and aloe, to preserve his body. Together, we walked the dusty roads to his tomb, a band of broken hearts wanting to honor Jesus in death.

It was a quiet walk and my mind wandered a great deal. I wondered what life would be like now that Jesus was gone. I thought about what I might do and where I might go. I knew for certain that there was no going back to the decadence of Herod's world. That place no longer meant anything to me and I felt sorry for the people who were stuck there in a life so rich in things and so poor in spirit.

It was a long walk but we were there too quickly. I was not eager to enter the tomb. Right away, however, we knew something was wrong. The stone that had been placed to seal the tomb was rolled away. Immediately, I thought the worst. I remembered those Roman soldiers who taunted him so cruelly. I felt certain that, unable to leave him alone even in death, they had come to humiliate his remains. But when we went in the tomb, there was no body at all. The tomb was empty.

We were puzzled about this and were frantically wondering who had taken his body away when suddenly, two men dressed in bright clothing stood beside us. We were terrified and fell to the ground covering our faces, all of us, even Mary Magdalene, in whom I had never before seen such fear. We had no idea what they wanted from us. That is when the question, my life's question, was first expressed. These men asked us, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" That is when I learned that good news sometimes comes in the form of a question. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

We were so eager to share what had happened, what we had seen and heard, we hurried to tell the others. In that moment, we became apostles to the apostles, sent to share the good news: Christ is risen! But they did not believe us. They thought we were crazy. Peter alone ran to the tomb as fast as his strong legs and his fervent hopes would carry him. The others? Well, our job was not to convince them. Our job and our joy was to be witnesses to the resurrection.

You cannot force anyone to believe anything. I cannot make you believe anything. God alone has that power. My calling is not to explain the resurrection or to defend it but to share my experience of the resurrection and to encourage you to experience it, to be uplifted by it.

As far as what the resurrection means, I can only tell you what I think it means. To me, the resurrection means that the powers of evil do not have the last word in the world or in your life. The Herods, the abusers, the liars, the manipulators, the power-mongers-they do not have the ultimate control. Even death itself cannot overwhelm God's purposes for this world and for your life. The resurrection means that we are never without hope! It means we may feel forsaken by God for a time but we are not forsaken. It means there is no end to the song God is singing. And something else-the resurrection is not something Jesus did. It is who Jesus Christ is. So why look for the living among the dead? Look for the living among the living.

Christ is risen! Examine your life. If there are places that are empty or shallow or callous or hurtful, pack up and leave them behind. Christ is risen! Find those places where and find those people in whom Christ is alive and living and spend yourself there where miracles bloom daily and where the fragrance of Christ surrounds you. Christ is risen and lives and continues to offer healing, encouragement, love. Christ is risen and provides a true pathway to the living God. Christ is risen! May that good news dwell within you and bring you endless hope.