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May 8, 2022
OMC

Death after Easter:
Acts 9:36-42; Psalm 23

Good Morning Everyone,

In the church calendar, this Sunday is marked as the Fourth Sunday of Easter; this means we are officially at our half way mark in our easter Sunday celebrations, with seven Easter Sundays total before we reach Pentecost on June 5th. Patty reminded me of this when I went to her for inspiration on how to approach our morning's scripture text. Tabitha's story reminds us that we are still living into the resurrection narrative. Our scriptures insist that Easter is not a one weekend affair, but a new reality that we continue to live in each day knowing that Jesus has overcome death.

This year Easter had a strange tone for me and my family. The week leading up to Easter, Matt's Grandmother Charlotte Voth died at the Rosthern Nursing home. We were able to spend her last few days gathered in her room as a family, singing hymns, reading scripture, and sharing stories about Grandma Voth's life as she rested and the nursing staff strove to keep her in a state of comfort. Her funeral took place on the Saturday in between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. While we were editing eulogies and going through photo albums, I remember commenting on how fitting our actions felt in light of Good Friday and Jesus' death. We were in the midst of our own grief.

When we read over the first view verses of Tabitha's story it is easy for me to feel connected to the actions of her loved ones who are in a time of grief. They go through the mourning rituals of that time, washing the body and laying it in an upper room. They weep and bring out the garments that Tabitha had made for them, they share stories and reflect on the significance of this individual in their lives. It's beautiful, and sad, and familiar to many of our experiences of grief.

Tabitha is named as a disciple, and a leader in this community; she provided tangible help for the vulnerable. And her death will hurt, not only because she is loved and will be missed, but because losing her will be detrimental to the poor in the community who have come to depend on her.

On this Fourth Sunday of Easter, we are invited into an intimate knowing of the grief that still exists in this community, even after Jesus' resurrection. After the shock, and joy, and celebration of Easter Sunday. After victory has been proclaimed over suffering and death. After Jesus has won, and we are told to live into the wonder of the truth of resurrection. Scripture brings us here, to the mourning of a community who is in a state of acute grief, who have lost a matriarch and a central support in their world. In the reality of the resurrection, then and now, there is still deep pain and grief.

In the case of Tabitha, we read on in her story to discover that she is resurrected, brought back to life and to her community. And I find it tempting to jump to that part of the story because it fits more easily into my understanding of Easter. It is easy to deny the grief and go to 'It's okay because Jesus was resurrected, and then Tabitha's resurrected so we don't have to even worry about death anymore.' But we all know this isn't true.

Thursday May 5th is Red Dress awareness day. A day taken to join in solidarity with all of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two Spirit People. It is a day to honor the individuals and the families who have been impacted by this, to give space in our communities for this enormous grief, and to face the continued pain and injustice that is still occurring. Even on this side of the resurrection story.

Esther E. Acolaste is a professor of theology and a woman of color who researches the implications of suffering, dying, and death. She counsels Christians to **“avoid using the Christine doctrine of the hope of the resurrection as a mantra for the relief of pain or grief. Death is still a mystery that our faith, however staunch, cannot completely resolve on this side of Eternity.”** This teaching is particularly important in the case of complex grief, where there is no easy closure, no resurrection at the end of the story, no acknowledgment for the pain, as is too often the case with Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. Where we must look into the tragedy and name it as such. When we, like Tabitha's community, weep with the anguish and fear for the vulnerable who depended on her.

So, what does it look like to show up as Easter people in these realities? To be people of hope and healing, as death continues to have detrimental impacts after the resurrection of Jesus. As Professor Acolaste names, we acknowledge that this is still an area of human experience that leaves us a little lost, where we do not have all the answers. And yet, she goes on to say that because we are people of the resurrection **“we will not be undone by this mystery called death,”** we will not sit passively by in instances of grief, or run from it because it is too much, or too horrible.

As people who have the hope of Easter, we can risk going into the most painful pieces of grief, because we have a hope that we will be able to move through it. We are particularly built for the work of solidarity because we are humans that know pain, and we are Christians who believe death will not be the end of the story. That justice and healing will come. And this belief does a couple of things for us.

First, it means that we can sit with people in the hard moments of life and death. Dr. Brene Brown says that **“In our saddest moments we want to be held by or feel connected to someone who has known that same ache, even if what caused it is completely different. We don’t want our sadness overlooked or diminished by someone who can’t tolerate what we’re feeling because they’re unwilling or unable to own their own sadness.”** We are people who know the grief and pain of this world, and who face the horror of the cross every year on Good Friday. We do not shy away from the hurt, we gather around it in solidarity. We come together as a community, just like what happened in the story of Tabitha. We accompany one another in moments of grief. We show up in the pain of a vigil for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, we gather around Rita & Sergey as they navigate evacuating family out of Ukraine as the country experiences war. We do not let anyone carry their grief alone.

Then we listen. It is so natural a step to tell stories of our loved ones when facing death. It is what my family did in the time surrounding Grandma Voth’s death, it is what we witness in Tabitha’s community as they share the impact Tabitha had on their lives.

It is the witness work we are called to in listening to the testimonies of family and friends who have had people disappear or who discover their loved ones died by cruelty. In fact, its particularly important to witness these stories, because our culture sometimes flinches away because they're too gruesome, something not be talked about in nice company or on Sunday morning. Bereavement expert Dr. Robert A. Neimeyer says that **“Most people who struggle with complicating loss feel a great press to ‘tell the story,’ to find someone willing to hear what others cannot, and who can join them in making sense of the death without drawing into awkward silence or offering trite and superficial advice regarding the questions it poses.”** So, we show up, and we listen.

Only then do we move into the next few verses in our morning's scripture passage, to the resurrection of Tabitha, to the pronouncement that hope is not lost, that healing will come. The stories in scripture are recorded to tell us about the nature of God in this world. And here we are told that God will not let the vulnerable go abandoned, raising Tabitha from the dead before letting her ministry die out. As people of Easter, we are called to live into this same fierce hope in a better reality, in healing for those who are hurting, and in a future that is freed from the pain of injustice. And so, like the disciple Peter we use the means we have to act in ways that bring out this truth. Not in denial of the pain, but in a belief that the world can be and will be healed.

It is with this calling in mind that we turn to our second scripture text for this morning. Paired in the lectionary with Tabitha's story is Psalm 23, often read aloud at funerals. Its comforting verses remind us that God remains present within the community when we are surrounded by darkness; present throughout life, death, and resurrection. It is appropriate to be read at a funeral service; it is also important to be proclaimed among the living, for it puts daily activities in a radically God-centered perspective, calling us to take our place in God's household and to live into the new reality we believe becomes accessible to us, in the love shown in Jesus' death and resurrection.

Sources: New Interpreters Bible Commentary, Believers Church Bible Commentary, Living Well and Dying Faithfully Ed. By John Swinton & Richard Payne – excerpt by Esther E. Acolaste; Atlas of the Heart by Brene Brown – including quote from Robert A. Neimeyer; Wanuskewin's MMIW Candle light Vigil & Speakers

Psalm 23

Yhwh, you are my shepherd—
 I want nothing more.
 You let me lie down in green meadows;
 you lead me beside restful waters:
 you refresh my soul.
 You guide me to lush pastures for the sake of your name.
 Even if I'm surrounded by shadows of Death,
 I fear no danger, for you are with me.
 Your rod and your staff—
 they give me courage.
 You spread a table for me
 in the presence of my enemies,
 and you anoint my head with oil—
 my cup overflows!
 Only goodness and love will follow me
 all the days of my life,
 and I will dwell in your house,
 Yhwh, for days without end.
 Amen.

Benediction: *(VT #983)*

Eternal Strength, hold us.
 Eternal Hope, show us new life.
 Eternal Compassion, comfort us in our grief.
 Eternal Goodness, grant us your grace
 as we live, work, and pray
 in this place, in this time,
 and with these people who reveal your love.
 Amen