

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

B: Easter 2

I Kings 8:56-61, Psalm 100, Romans 8:24-39, Matthew 28:1-10

7 April 2024

Salem, Bridgeport

“Neither Death Nor Life...”

This is a special day in the life of Salem Lutheran Church in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

For me, it's the funeral for the congregation.

And so, of course, there is grief. And grief is a journey that involves a whole complex of emotions.

According to the Kubler-Ross model, there are five stages – denial, anger, bargaining, depression & acceptance.

Another model adds 2 more stages – shock and testing.

But anyone who has traversed the path of grief,

understands that there are many, many more emotions involved than just those 7.

Last week, here at Salem, we read as our gospel the original end of the gospel of Mark,

in which 3 grieving women go to anoint the dead body of Jesus.

They discover that the stone sealing his tomb has been rolled away

and when they go inside, they see a young man clothed in a white robe, who tells them not to be afraid, because Jesus is risen from dead, and has gone before them to Galilee.

He instructs them to go, and they flee trembling and bewildered,

and they say nothing to anyone because they are too frightened.

And that's where Mark ends his story.

There is no sighting of the resurrected Jesus.

That's right.

In Mark's original gospel, there is no resurrection – just the announcement of one.

The women are left confused and frightened and the future is far from certain.

That's why today I had us read the Easter gospel according to Matthew.

While Matthew expands upon the details in Mark's account a bit,

it's essentially the same story, but it continues on a bit longer.

According to Matthew, the women actually do intend to go tell the disciples,

but before they can set out, Jesus himself meets them and greets them,

and they come to him, take hold of his feet and worship him –

until Jesus, himself, tells them to go tell the disciples.

Thanks to Matthew and Luke and John, we know the end of Mark's story

because they all include in their accounts how the resurrected Jesus appeared to his disciples

and lived among them for 40 days before ascending into heaven.

But we know the end of Mark's story for another reason as well –

because those disciples told others who told others who told others down through the ages

and eventually others told us – which is why we are here.

That story of the resurrection tells us that while many things – including people and congregations – do die,

and while death causes us to experience real grief, death does not have the final word –

which is why our funeral services are not centered on our grief, but on our hope.

They are not centered on death, but on life.

That's why I chose Psalm 100 for today and why I chose the picture for the cover of your bulletin.

Every time we come into the main entrance of this church building,

we are reminded by the words over the door that we are to

“Serve the Lord with gladness! Come before his presence with singing!

Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise!”

We are not to come to church with sadness in our hearts.

We are not to enter with thanklessness or unappreciation.

Yes, of course we may be grieving what we have lost,

we may have feelings of anger or resentment or vengeance,

we may be sad or depressed,

we may be confused and uncertain over situations in our lives,

but when we come into the presence of the God of boundless power and endless love,

when the resurrected Jesus meets us and greets us,

when the Spirit of the living God fills our hearts and fills this place,

then all our earthly troubles should completely melt away – at least while we are worshipping!

And the reason we can let go of our grief while we worship is because of what the rest of Psalm 100 says:

“Know that the Lord is God”, which reminds us that God has the power to do absolutely anything.

“It is God that made us and we are God's”, which reminds us that God created us for joy,

that God is responsible for us, and that God wants nothing more than what's best for us.

“For the Lord is good; God's steadfast love endures forever, and God's faithfulness to all generations!”

Our first reading from first kings expands on that last part of Psalm 100:

“... Not one word has failed of all God's good promise...”

Not one word of God has ever failed and not one word of God can ever fail.

Because God's word is a creating word. When God speaks, creation happens.

When God said, “Let there be light!”, there was light!

And so when God promises us anything, we can be sure that eventually that promise *will* be fulfilled!

And so Solomon speaks these words of blessing over the people then

and I believe Holy Scripture speaks these same words over us today:

“The Lord our God be with us as he was with our ancestors,

may he not leave us or abandon us, but incline our hearts to him,

to walk in all the ways ... which he commanded our ancestors...

may God maintain the cause of his people...

So that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God and there is no other.”

Scripture tells us that the fruits of the Spirit are

love & joy, peace & patience, faithfulness, kindness, goodness, generosity, & self-control.

Those are the things that God desires for us,

and yet there are times when the fruit trees of our lives seem pretty bare.

In fact, the season of grief is kind of like winter here in New England,

when the fruit has come and gone, and the leaves have fallen from the branches, and the trees look dead.

But like winter, the season of grief passes, & then there will be new leaves, and blossoms and flowers and fruit.

That may be where many of us are at the moment.

We may be like the women at the end of the gospel of Mark, uncertain, confused, and afraid.

And yet they were given a promise, a promise that moved through them

like sap running through a tree at the beginning of spring, a promise that gave birth to hope.

And that's where our lesson from Romans comes in.

"For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope.

For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise, the spirit helps us in our weakness..."

Every person here is in a different place in their journey through grief.

Some may have come through it completely and are chomping at the bit to get into their next congregation.

Others may still be in shock or denial, or have intentionally decided to live in the Now,

cherishing each and every moment here at Salem,

celebrating the life of this congregation at this "funeral" service,

& not even thinking about what's next until after our private family graveside "burial" service next Sunday.

For some of our guests there may be some sadness, but it won't affect their daily lives.

But even beyond this experience of Salem's closing,

each one of us here is likely experiencing grief over other losses in our lives -

death of a spouse or close family member, divorce or separation, imprisonment,

injury or illness, loss of youth, looks, physical ability, or independence,

loss of faith or hope or trust, or any major change in one's life situation.

In all of these challenges, we need hope to sustain us on our journeys.

We also need faith.

And here are the words on which we base our faith:

"We know that all things work together for good

for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose....

If God is for us, who is against us?...

Who will separate us from the love of Christ?

Hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...

In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For... neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come,

nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,

will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ, Jesus, our Lord."

No matter what your situation, no matter what you are currently feeling, you are here today.

You are here today, because God made sure you were here today.

And God made sure you were here today

to hear the words of hope and faith that we believe and confess and proclaim:

"Know that the Lord is God.

It is he that made us and we are his.

Give thanks to the Lord for he is good;

his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations."

"Not one word has failed of all God's good promise."

"Hope for what you do not yet see and wait for it with patience, knowing that...

all things work together for good for those who love God who are called according to his purpose."

And know that, no matter what you are going through,

you are more than a conqueror through Christ, who loves you.

And nothing in all creation

will be able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Receive it! Believe it! And claim it as done!

For Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed!** Alleluia! **Amen**