

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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A Broken Hallelujah

The truth is that Christ has been raised up, the first in a long legacy of those who are going to leave the cemeteries. - 1 Corinthians 15:16-29

Among the most beautiful things that I witness as a minister is a family gathering around a bedside when a loved one is passing. That might surprise you. We don't normally think of a time of death as a beautiful thing, any more than we think of illness as beautiful, or poverty, or any of those other challenges in life. A time of death is an incredibly difficult time for families. It is often difficult physically, to tear themselves away from their everyday lives and travel the distance to be present with their loved one, and cope with the exhaustion of sleeping irregularly. It is difficult emotionally, as they steel themselves for a final farewell, and cope with the complexities of family relationships. And it is difficult spiritually, as they try to come to terms with death and the anxiety it brings.

It is difficult, and yet it is beautiful. It is beautiful to see a family ministering to a loved one in the last weeks, the last days, the last hours. It is beautiful to see them attending to the needs of their loved one, offering sips of water, sponging out a dry mouth, arranging pillows and blankets, playing soft music, receiving friends and relatives, and all the little things that need to be done during those last hours and days, supporting one another too as they endure those final moments.

One woman spent the last night with her father sitting by his bedside, holding his hand. After he died, her husband asked her about that time, "What did you do all night long? What did you say?" "I ran out of things to say," she explained, "so I sang all the Easter hymns I could remember, and I said, 'Easter's coming, Daddy, Easter's coming.'"

It is beautiful, even though it is never perfect, even though there are always stresses and strains between family members. Perhaps it is even more beautiful that these last opportunities for care give people the opportunity to release anger and bitterness, to forgive and heal. These ordinary, fractured, never perfect relationships are the context in which we give and receive the beautiful gift of loving care. There is something beautiful about new parents caring for a helpless child at the very beginning of life. And there is something beautiful about those who care for a helpless person at the very end of life as well.

The story goes that in Jesus' last hours, he was not alone. John's gospel says that his mother, an aunt, Mary Magdalene and the "beloved disciple," were there, at the cross, watching and waiting, holding onto one another, supporting one another. It is a very ordinary, very human, very beautiful picture of them doing what people do at a time of death, watching and waiting and hoping and holding each other. The story goes that when he died, late on a Friday afternoon, they and some friends placed him in a tomb, and slid a large stone in front of the entrance.

And the story goes that early on the Sunday morning, while it was still dark, the women went back to the tomb. The gospels vary somewhat in their accounts: John's gospel has Mary Magdalene going alone; Matthew says there was another Mary along, Mark says Salome was there too and Luke says Johanna was there along with a few others who had been with Jesus from the beginning. They went to do that other beautiful thing that we do at a time of death, to prepare a body for burial, washing and dressing and lavishing on it the love of a lifetime.

But the story goes that they did not have the opportunity to do that ordinary, beautiful thing, that instead something extraordinarily beautiful happened, that the one they thought was gone forever appeared and spoke to them in some strange and transformed way.

I don't pretend to understand this. I don't know what happened to Jesus' body. I don't know what the first disciples intended when they told this story. I do know that the questions that we bring to it, the questions of a modern, scientific age, are not the questions the earliest disciples would have asked or anticipated. Rather than those modern questions, I ask what I understand to be post-modern questions, about the power of a story, about the ways in which stories can shape and form the way we see the world, about how some stories can be oppressive, and others can be liberating, and some can be both, depending on how they are remembered and retold. I don't believe that the stories of Easter were told primarily to provide an historical account of an event that happened one Sunday morning long ago. I believe rather, that their stories are told to liberate us from the power of death, so that we can live in the power of Easter hope. And I also believe that when we tell this story, we are freed to offer that beautiful care to one another, from birth to death, without fear and without reserve.

The story of Easter reveals that this peasant leader, one of three killed that day alone, was something more than another victim of the callous machinery of empire. The story of Easter reveals Jesus as the chosen one of God, the instrument of God's peace. The story tells us that this instrument of God's peace emptied himself, taking human form, being born in poverty and homelessness, growing and living as a peasant, and

then endured the most horrible death human cruelty has ever devised. This story completely changes the way we see God, life and death. No longer can we see God as identical with an indifferent and cruel fate. Now we see God as the companion who walks with us every step of life's journey. Because of his life and because of his death, we can never look at poverty in quite the same way again. We can never look at suffering and death in quite the same way again. We can never look at life the same way again.

This story tells us that in the most humiliating situations, situations of illness and poverty, disease and death, when people are unable to help themselves, when people depend on each other the most, the act of offering humble care involves us in the beautiful work of God. The moments that might otherwise disgust us, the people that might otherwise repulse us, the tasks that might otherwise revolt us, are revealed as the opportunity to be agents in that beautiful work in which God cares for all God's creation, especially the lost and the least.

There is a beautiful expression of this in the film adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's children's book *The Hobbit*. Some of you may not know that Hobbits are small, insignificant creatures in the great scheme of the world. They are humble creatures who enjoy food, drink and blowing smoke rings with their pipes. They stay close to home and play little part in the great trends of history. They are generally overlooked. In this scene, two of the main characters, Gandalf and Galadriel are becoming aware that a great evil is stirring, and that they will have to challenge it. But how? How will they combat great evil?

Some, says Gandalf, believe "that it is only great power that can hold evil in check. But that is not what I have found. I have found that it is the small things, everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keeps the darkness at bay: simple acts of kindness and love." (scene 20: 1:41.30 -1:43) This scene, I think, summarizes in short the theme of the book, a very Christian theme that God works through we ordinary everyday people to accomplish beautiful work.

The story of Easter tells us that God is at work in our world in and through the ordinary acts of care we offer one another, the little ways in which we express our affection and love and forgiveness. The story of Easter tells us that love cannot be known apart from care offered in the midst of our brokenness, that the greatest depths of holiness are exposed in the moments when we are vulnerable and need each other's help the most. Our praise is richest and deepest in the depth of suffering. Our Hallelujah is most faithful when it is a broken Hallelujah. Amen.