

SERMON TITLE: “Why Are You Weeping?”

TEXT: John 20:1-18

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

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Christ is risen!

We’ve already heard and celebrated the message of Easter today. We’ve gathered around the Lord’s Table to remember what Jesus has done for us, and to look forward to the day when the victory accomplished by Christ’s resurrection will be a permanent reality.

I’m going to simply offer a few stories, a few reflections on the message of Easter and why it is such good news.

We just heard Naomi read the Easter story. It is an amazing story about the triumph of life over death, of weeping turning into laughter and rejoicing.

This is what Christians all over the world are celebrating today: in rising from the dead, Jesus defeated the power of death.

But as we all know, death is still a pretty big part of life on this planet. Plants die, animals die, and people die. Some die quickly and dramatically, some die slowly and painfully. But however it happens, death is still a major source of pain both for those going through it and for those who are left behind.

Despite what happened on that Sunday two thousand years ago, in many ways things still look the same. It doesn’t always look like death is a defeated enemy.

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Yesterday the kids and I were sitting around doing some deep reading and we came across a classic piece of literature that illustrates this reality.

CALVIN AND HOBBS SLIDE.

Explanation: Calvin & Hobbes found a wounded raccoon. They tried to nurture it back to health, but the raccoon ended up dying. Calvin’s crying....

What a stupid world.

Death forces all of us—even six year old boys and their pet tigers!—to ask hard questions about what kind of world we live in and what we can hope for.

And it’s not just six year olds that conclude that we live in a stupid world!

I remember as a teenager sitting in a packed church in Lethbridge, AB at the funeral of my 19 year-old friend—a guy I played hockey with, who I hung out with and studied with

at school—who had died of cancer thinking that it was simply *incomprehensible* that my friend could be gone. It seemed ludicrous that there should be such a thing as death—that there should exist such a monster that was capable of taking what so precious to us.

Like Calvin, I thought, *What a stupid world.*

From ordinary people dealing with everyday life to the brightest minds in history have, many have looked at all the suffering and death in our world and come to the same conclusion that Calvin did!

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I saw another example of this just a few weeks ago.

One of the more unexpected requests that I have received during my first couple of years as a pastor is to perform a graveside service for a complete stranger.

A few weeks ago the most recent call came. The wife of the man whose service I had performed a year ago had died in Langley, and she was to be buried beside her husband in Nanaimo.

And so, on a sunny, breezy March afternoon I was back down in Cedar at the cemetery—back with my collection of words and Psalms and prayers. I very faintly remembered the family, but mostly they remained strangers.

The mood was significantly lighter this time than the other two. This death was not a surprise. She had had a stroke two months ago and everyone knew it was only a matter of time. Her passing was described as a mercy not a tragedy.

Smiles and lively conversation replaced hushed tones and tears. Their loved one had lived nearly ninety years and had experienced many of the best things life has to offer—a large family, lots of children and grandchildren whose lives she was involved in right until the end, time and resources to travel, hobbies to enjoy. In many ways, the minutes leading up to the service felt more like a meet and greet at a dinner party than a somber graveside service.

I felt more relaxed than at previous ones. I was relieved that this would probably be a fairly “routine” and simple service—not a lot of complicated emotional displays and open grief, just a normal family gathering to gratefully remember a happy life.

And that’s what it was, for the most part. The first part of the ceremony proceeded according to the script. And then it came to the part where I said that there would be some space provided for those who wanted to place some flowers or sprinkle some sand on the casket, or say a few words of goodbye to do so.

There was one little boy—he can’t have been more than 10 or 11 years old—who I had been watching throughout. I had noticed him before the service began, mainly because of his Nanaimo Minor Hockey jacket. My son plays hockey, so I found myself wondering

what team he played for, if he would be playing with Nicky next year, etc. He didn't look particularly excited to be there. He looked a bit bored. He was the only person under 30 there. I assumed that he was putting in time, not much more.

He was one of the last ones to walk up to the casket. I watched him as he approached. He took a flower and looked around, back at his mom, and then back at the casket. His lip quivered a bit. He put the flower on top, and then he went back and stood in front of his mom. I kept watching him. A few seconds passed, and then something I did *not* expect happened.

He began to weep. His little shoulders convulsed, his head was bowed, and the tears flowed. His mom put her arms around him and held him while he continued to cry for several minutes.

This little boy who I had assumed was there out of obligation, paying his respects to a great-grandma he was barely old enough to know as anything other than a very old woman bore eloquent witness to the pain of death.

What a stupid world.

Death is not routine or natural. It is not normal or simple. It *is* complicated. And it hurts.

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Our text this morning begins with another death scene, at another time and in another place. Naomi read about it just a few minutes ago. Jesus has been crucified. Despite all of the optimism and hope and anticipation that accompanied his arrival in Jerusalem just a few days prior, this man in whom so many had placed their hopes had ended up on a Roman cross.

And just like Calvin with his raccoon, just like the little boy at the graveside, Mary is staring death in the face. Like them, she is weeping.

She is weeping because of the sadness of the previous day's events—weeping because of what Jesus suffered, weeping because she the stone has been rolled away and Jesus' body is gone and who knows what they've done with him, weeping because she is not ready to let Jesus go, weeping because she is confused and fatigued and angry and hopeless. Weeping because once again it seems like death and violence and hatred and deceit and fear have won out over love and hope and compassion and truth.

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So far this probably sounds more like a Good Friday sermon than an Easter Sunday sermon. Friday is about death, but Sunday is supposed to be about hope, and new life, right? Easter Sunday is about *resurrection!* It's about *celebration!*

I think sometimes the good news is better once we appreciate the bad news. The bad news is that we live in a world of death and decay. We all know this. Each person in this room has been touched by the death of someone close to us—some more recently than others.

Many of us know people who, right now, are engaged in behaviours and habits that are leading them straight to the grave, if not physically, then spiritually, relationally, or mentally. We are a people well-acquainted with death.

But the really good news—the *Easter* news—is that there is more to the story than death. This is the good news that Mary discovered beside a tomb outside of Jerusalem.

Through all the tears and confusion, a man approaches. “Why are you weeping?” “Who is it you are looking for?”

Mary is obviously looking for the body of Jesus, but I think she is also looking for what we are all looking for—some hint or clue that death isn’t the final word. She thought Jesus was to be the one. She thought he was the hope of Israel, and a light to the Gentiles.

And then he goes and gets himself killed! She sees him hanging on that awful cross like a piece of meat. He wasn’t striking a very triumphant or hopeful pose. Death wins again. *What a stupid world!*

But then... Jesus speaks her name. And she finally sees him. *He’s alive!!* She is overjoyed! She is commissioned to go and tell the disciples. All is not lost. There is hope again! Death thought it had won but it hadn’t!! Jesus has conquered the grave!

It shouldn’t have been such a surprise. Jesus had told his followers what to expect. He had given them hints and clues of what was coming...

Earlier in John’s gospel, when Jesus was trying to explain to his disciples what he had to do, Jesus says to them, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.”

I know what I’m doing here. It may look crazy and confusing and you may not understand why things have to be this way, but just hang on. Don’t give up. Trust me.

A little later, he says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

Even in the chaos, even when death and tragedy are right around the corner, even when life crashes in... My gift to you is peace. My peace goes beyond the superficial peace the world gives—a peace that sounds good as a slogan and looks good on a T-shirt, a peace that depends on circumstance and mood. My peace will see you through the darkest times. My peace can release you from fear...

And then... well, then all hell breaks loose. The mob demands that Jesus be crucified. He’s claimed to be a king, after all, but he’s nothing but a fraud, an imposter, a disturber of the peace. Put him up on the cross with all the other criminals.

Jesus is tortured and executed. The hopes of his followers are crushed. They see him suffer and die. It was all for nothing.

And then... and then Mary comes waving her arms hysterically, yelling something about him being *alive*. That she has *seen* him and *talked* to him. And then... in the middle of their meeting, he's *there*. He's standing there. It can't be!!

And what does he say? *Peace be with you*. He says it three times in John 20, in the verses following our passage this morning, just in case we didn't catch it the first time.

You see, I knew what I was doing. God has a plan. You can trust me. I am stronger than death.

Before he goes the way of the cross, Jesus says "Peace I leave with you..." "Do not let your hearts be troubled." And when he sees them again *after* the cross, "Peace be with you."

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Can you and I be at peace in a world where death still haunts us?

Well, on one level, I don't think we are meant to be entirely at peace with death. No matter how "natural" it is on a biological level, it is unnatural on a human level. We were created for eternity—God has set it in our hearts, according to Ecclesiastes 3:11. Death is our enemy, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:26. Like the little boy at the graveside, death hits us hard because we were created for life.

But the good news of Easter is that there is a peace that we can be ours *despite* the reality of death. It is a peace that Jesus alone can give because he has come out the other side of death. He has conquered our enemy.

It is a peace that is grounded in the *power* of God to raise Jesus from the dead, and the *goodness* of God to lead us even through what we can't understand.

I want to leave us with two Easter truths:

1. Even though death might seem powerful, there is a hope beyond the grave; there is new life—life that is more secure, joyful, and lasting than anything we will ever experience here. The resurrection of Christ gives us hope that this life is not the end. There is a future of peace that awaits us.
2. Jesus has left us with the mandate of being Easter people in a world of death. We are to point the way to the possibility of new life here and now, to the reality that God can and does live within us, renewing us, giving us hope and courage and strength and faith. And peace. This is our job as individuals and as a church. We are to be Easter people—people who say, all year round, that Christ is risen and God's new world has begun!

There is hope for the future *and* hope right now. Because of Easter, we are saved *from* our sins and promised eternal life.

But we are also saved *for* a new and better Easter kind of life in the meantime. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says that if anyone is in Christ he (or she) is a new creation!

We had originally intended to have a baptism service today and that would have been really good and appropriate. But in a way, it is good to wait until next week as well, because it reminds us that the new life symbolized by baptism, the new life made possible by Easter, is a year-round thing! We are meant to be “Easter people” all year round, not just once a year.

That is what each person who joins us in membership or by baptism is saying—“we want to be a part of this community as it testifies, all year round, to the reality that there is lasting peace and hope available, even in a world that sometimes seems stupid—where people get sick and die, and where violence and evil still seem so prevalent.”

We have hope for the future and for the present. We can be new creations.

The resurrection of Jesus at Easter is not a supernatural trick that proves that Jesus *really is* God or that the Bible *really is* true or anything like that. It is much bigger and more exciting than that!!

It is the beginning of the end of death.

It is the *announcement* that a new world has begun, even if it doesn't always look like it.

It is an *invitation* to all to place their trust in Jesus, just as Jesus said in John 14: “Do not let your hearts be troubled...” Even in this world so full of death and chaos and confusion. “Trust in God; trust also in me.”

It is the *summons* to God's people to live as new creations.

Even when death seems stronger than life. Even when it seems like there is no peace—in our world or in our own lives.

Our world is *not* a stupid one. Fallen? Yes. Sometimes painful? Certainly.

But also dearly loved by God, redeemed by the death and resurrection of Jesus, and in the process of being renewed.

I think that's worth celebrating!

Thanks be to God.

