

“The Courage to Tell Idle Tales”

April 8, 2007

Easter

Isaiah 65:17-25

Luke 24:1-12

Imagine that you’ve watched someone you love over a period of several years. You’ve seen this person grow and mature and discover some of the gifts she or he has to offer the world. “She’s coming into her own,” you might say to yourself, or “He’s finding his way.” Imagine that you’ve encountered the warmth and radiance of God, the presence of the Holy Spirit, in this person. Her delight in people and animals or his joy in helping someone has given you a glimpse of God’s love and grace in human form.

Imagine that this person came into your life at a time when things seemed grim, when you’d been struggling with disease of the body, mind, or spirit ... or when you’d simply been feeling lifeless and listless. Imagine that wherever you were in your life before this person came along, watching him, loving and being loved by her, seeing the light of God in this person – all this opened you to life and to healing in unexpected ways.

Now imagine that the day comes when this radiant person, this vessel of God’s glory, encounters the power of violence. The day comes when this beloved daughter or son of God encounters the destructive power of human beings at their worst. Imagine that this one whom you love and in whom you have seen the face of God does not live to see the sun set. Imagine that this one whom you love dies young, murdered in a paroxysm of violence.

It breaks my heart that some people here in this sanctuary don’t have to *imagine* this experience. It breaks my heart that mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers don’t have to *imagine* this experience in Santa Rosa and San Francisco, in Baghdad and Bogota, in Darfur and the Dakotas. They don’t have to *imagine* the experience because they *remember* it.

Recent news reports reminded us of a group of people, a small community of people, who also don’t have to imagine losing some of their children to a violent death. An Amish community near Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, opened a new school a little over a week ago. They were replacing the schoolhouse where ten of their children – ten of their *daughters* – were gunned down by a man who then killed himself. Five of those girls died, four returned to school, and one remains severely disabled, unable to eat or speak. The new school, named “New Hope,” opened exactly six months after the violence and trauma of that horrible day.

The news about the New Hope Amish School brought to mind the Amish community’s initial response to the deadly attack on their children. Referring to the gunman, one woman simply said that he had “problems of the heart;” she refused to call him “evil.” Another member of the community described the community’s response in this way: “I don’t think there’s anybody here who wants to do anything but forgive and not only reach out to those who have suffered a loss in that way but to reach out to the family of the man who committed these acts.”

At a time when the leaders of nations call each other “evil” and “Satan” and when the leaders and believers of one religion demonize the leaders and believers of other religions, in a country that imprisons more of its citizens per capita and carries out more executions than all but one or two other nations on earth, and in the face of an administration that has sanctioned torture for the supposed greater good . . . at this time and in this place, a small community of people suffers a wrenching, horrific loss and, in response, speaks quietly and gently. It speaks of forgiveness, healing, and a gunman who was not “evil,” but had “problems of the heart.” This is the courage to speak the truth to people and to a culture that may dismiss that truth as nothing but an idle tale. This is the courage to say in the midst of pain and death, violence and loss, that death does not have the final word. This is the courage to say that love, forgiveness, and compassion are the only things that can heal the deepest wounds.

So it seems to me that at least one community in rural Pennsylvania experienced its own Good Friday and its own Easter before we even began our Holy Week observances a week ago. On its Good Friday, that Amish community experienced the violence and ugliness of human brokenness or, to use a more difficult term, the raw power of human sin. It lived through the horror of brutal, senseless death, and then, on its own Easter day, it showed the world that love had not died. It revealed to the world what Christians understand as the beauty and the power of the risen Christ.

Following in the footsteps of our Amish sisters and brothers, following in the footsteps of our ancestors in faith who have walked this road over thousands of years, we gather here this morning to celebrate Easter and to proclaim, yet again, “Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed!” We have joined with our sisters and brothers across time and across the globe in having lived through the horror and despair of Good Friday, in watching as one in whom God’s light was radiant and God’s presence palpable dies alone on a cross. And now, this morning, we join the women from Galilee as they walk to the tomb, ready to care for Jesus’ body by performing an ancient ritual with spices and ointment.

As Luke tells the story, Mary, Joanna, Mary, and “the other women” arrive at the tomb and find no body. Instead, they see two men who tell them that Jesus is risen. The women are at first terrified, but then they go to the other disciples and tell them what they have seen. The men, the other disciples, don’t believe the women’s “idle tale.” But one of them, impetuous, head-strong Peter, runs to the tomb and finds nothing there but cloth.

This is the tale Christians have been telling for nearly two thousand years. Is it, in fact, an idle tale? A fairy tale? A fantasy? Is the truth at the heart of this story so fragile that, as some people have recently suggested, it would crumble into nonsense if someone could prove that some ancient bones were actually Jesus’ bones?

The truth at the heart of this story is far more resilient than that; the truth at the heart of this story is the truth of God’s heart. The truth of this story, this “idle tale,” is that God’s love, God’s grace, and God’s forgiveness cannot be defeated even by humanity’s greatest ugliness or, to use that word again, by *sin*. Even when we are at our ugliest, rejecting, attacking, and persecuting someone in whom God is tangibly, obviously present . . . even then, we can still be the recipients of God’s grace. Even then, *especially* then, we can still be – we still are, all of us – redeemable. We are – miraculously – still God’s beloved.

This, my friends, is good news. This is good news that we need, because the ugliness of Good Friday didn't end on the Good Friday of nearly two thousand years ago. As I heard another minister say two days ago, humanity is still driving the nails of hate into tender, loving hands. We are still crucifying the sons and daughters of God, on the cross of poverty, the cross of violence, the cross of indifference, the cross of meaningless consumption and distraction. We are both the crucifiers and the crucified. We need this idle tale. We need the experience of Easter to turn our hearts and our lives to the God who brings life in the midst of death and who brings forgiveness and love in the midst of our betrayal and our failure to love.

But do you, do we, have the courage to believe this tale, to tell it and to try to live it? Make no mistake, believing that God's truth is in this story does take courage. Believing, and living as though we believe, that love and forgiveness are the most powerful forces in human life can seem naïve, if not downright foolish. This tale asks us to risk such foolishness, and it calls on us to have the courage to risk even more. It asks us to believe and live as though we believe that we all belong to one another and to God. It asks us to believe and live the belief that our fundamental calling is to love and care for one another and for all of God's creation. It asks us to live in ways that are profoundly subversive in a culture that holds out the "good life" as the highest goal without asking whose sweat, whose poverty, and whose misery that good life is built on. This tale also asks us to believe and live the belief that Christ is risen and is alive in those who are hungry, sick, and imprisoned and in those who are foreigners, strangers, and even enemies. No wonder the apostles wanted to dismiss the women's story as an idle tale! If it is a true tale, it asks a great deal of us. But if it is a true tale, and not an idle one, it promises us more than it asks of us.

So, my beloved friends, have the courage ... the hope ... and the faith ... to accept the promises as well as the calling in this tale. Have the courage to accept the fullness of God's claim and blessing on your lives. Have the courage to let God's love touch all of your life and all of who you are. Let God's love touch, not only the parts you willingly share with others, but also the parts you hide from others with great shame. Have the courage to let God's love change you, soften you, heal you, and open you to the fullness of life.

When all seems lost, when your heart is heavy with grief and despair, when the forces of violence seem to have swept aside tenderness and beauty – when you are in the midst of your own Good Friday – have the courage to go to the place of your greatest pain and loss. Dare to go to the tomb where your hopes, your laughter, and your dreams have been buried. Dare to discover that the heart of God has been holding your own broken, nearly lifeless heart, and then dare to discover that God is bringing it back to life. Dare to encounter the holy, what Christians know as the living Christ, in the midst of pain, despair, and loss.

And when – not "if" – you encounter the living Christ in some unexpected place or form, have the courage to tell the tale. Have the courage to speak the truth of your heart's encounter with the heart of God. In a world of great brokenness, your story may well be greeted as an idle tale. But your words, your story, may also prompt another to risk his or her own encounter with the living Christ, the holy presence of love, healing, and forgiveness. Your "idle" tale of encountering God may just be the good news that

this broken and yet still beautiful world needs. These courageous tales are among the greatest gifts any of us can offer in response to the gifts we all receive Easter morning and every morning.

Tell your own tales of God's transforming, healing grace. Listen to the tales of family, friends, and strangers. And be ready to be amazed. Be ready to let God love and heal the world through you.

Amen.

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