

## **From the Ashes**

Rev. John Allen

On Thursday Evening we gathered in this Sanctuary to remember the end of Jesus' life, his violent arrest, sham trial, and execution. We recall this story in a service of Tenebrae, or shadows.

With each passing moment, as hope fades, and disciples fail and flee, we put out candles, one at a time, until the entire sanctuary is as dark as a sealed tomb.

This year, one of our soloists sang a beautiful spiritual, most famously recorded by Harry Belafonte, called "Take My Mother Home."

It is a beautiful piece of religious imagination, as if the singer is walking beside Christ through his final moments:

"I think I heard Him say, when He was struggling up the hill, I think I heard him say, take my mother home."

We recount the events of Holy Week in all their grand drama, the procession of palms, the Last Supper, Jesus paraded and mocked. It is a story we know so well, its unique details forged in our minds eye. It is a moment, a story, that to us as Christians has unique historical significance.

When I was sitting here this week, listening to Emily sing those words. “take my mother home.”

I was struck with a different part of this story.

Its simple humanity.

Imagining Jesus’ deep desire that his mother not need to witness his death, suddenly makes all unique historical details fall away.

And it reveals to us the unsettling truth.

At its heart the story of Jesus final days is actually quite ordinary.

The powerful become violent. The vulnerable are the scapegoats. A message of love is stamped out by hatred. And a mother's child dies.

The horror of the cross is actually not its unique brutality. But the way that it reminds us of the benign brutality that is part of this world day, after day, after day.

It had happened before, it's happening still. That part of the story is tragically ordinary.

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What *is* extraordinary is what happened three days later. What happened today. The brutal violent world had spoken loud and clear once again, but this time, God spoke louder.

The grip of death once again declared itself the final victor, but God pulled life back from death, and won the great victory once and for all.

The shadows give way to the light of a new day, and God's love, and life, and hope, get the last word after all.

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Like me, last week you probably saw the Cathedral at Notre Dame on fire. Perhaps you were watching on TV when the spire collapsed, maybe you breathed a little easier once it became clear that most of the stone structured would be spared.

It was one of those increasing rare moments where it felt like all our hearts were pointed in the same direction. Captivated by a uniquely dramatic moment of pain, sorrow, and fear. Cable news went with wall-to-wall coverage. Newspapers ran banner headlines. And

condolences and expressions of support and solidarity poured in from leaders and ordinary people around the world.

Then something extraordinary happened.

Then someone reminded us that this was actually not as unique as it might seem. Churches burn all the time.

And over the past several months three historic black churches in Louisiana have been destroyed by hate motivated arson.

Something extraordinary happened, while our hearts were all pointed in the same direction, toward the pain of watching Notre Dame burn, the moment became an occasion for our compassion to widen.

Seeing those dramatic images reminded us that the pain of a holy place aflame does not only take place along the Sienne.

And as of this morning, those churches in Louisiana have received nearly \$2 million in donations to rebuild, most of those donors people whose hearts were initially moved by the fire at Notre Dame.

Was it a good thing that those fires happened? Of course not.

But look what can happen when we let the big tragedies point our hearts toward the more ordinary pain of the world.

And look what God can do with ashes and dust.

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And maybe you didn't need a burning cathedral to remind you that too often beautiful things fall to dust, and burn away to ashes.

Maybe your own life is enough of a reminder. Your own pain is real enough. Your own grief, right there on the surface of your heart.

Maybe you do not know the pleasure of forgetting your deepest fears, even for a moment.

Maybe there is a fire that you are walking through even today. Or something that felt as solid a stone, that is starting to crumble away.

I am not here to tell you that it is good for you that those bad things happened. I am not here to tell you that your suffering is for some mysterious purpose.

But, on Easter, I am here to remind you what God can do with ashes, and dust. And what God can do even with death.

And I am here to remind you of the core truth of our faith. The worst thing, is not the last thing. The worst thing, is not the last thing.

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Their hearts had been scorched to the core when those women walked by the dim morning light to the tomb. They had expected miracles. They thought that Jesus was the one who would finally set them free.

They thought they would be following him to freedom, to hope, to life.

And instead they followed up him a hill, to see him die.

There are unique things about their story, but you know the feeling.

The knot of grief in your stomach days after the death. Wondering how long you will have to carry that sorrow. Not really knowing what to do.

But their religious tradition gave them a task. They were to go to the tomb, to care for the body, to bring spices and oils.

When they came over the hill and saw the stone rolled away, the last whisp of hope their hearts were clinging to blew away, his body was

gone, now they could not even do the simple loving things their hands and hearts desired to do for this Jesus who they had loved.

As if the indignity of his death was not enough, he was not being deprived a decent burial. Someone had come, and taken him away.

You know this feeling, when you are finally convinced that things cannot get any worse. And then they do.

Mary was weeping on the floor of the tomb when the gardener walks up and asks her what's wrong. You know that person whose best intentions still felt like daggers when your heart is bruised by grief?

She snaps at him, "if you took him away, tell us where he is." She begs him, "please."

Her hearts only desire in that moment to care for his body, to offer him in death a touch of reverence and love. It is all she can think to hope for.

Until he says her name. And she realizes it is him.

You might know this feeling too. That time that you got something you needed more than anything else, even if it was the last thing your heart expected, or something your spirit could scarcely imagine.

Perhaps you too have seen what God can do with ashes and dust.

Maybe you know the truth at the core of our faith, that the worst thing, is never the last thing.

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The story of Jesus' death is not about one terrible thing that happened a long time ago. It is our sobering reminder that the powers of the world take life and shatter hope, again, and again, and again. It is a tragically familiar story of what happens when someone

stands up for the vulnerable, and tries to remake the world around love.

And in the same way Easter is not just about one amazing thing that happened once a long time ago. Easter is a story that tells us who God is, and what God does.

Easter reminds us that with God, love will always get the last and louder word. That life, and hope, can spring forth from dust, from ashes, and yes even from the grave.

Easter is our time to see that our lives are what God has build out of the ashes and dust of all our our heartbreaks and sorrows. And that we are the beautiful things God has forged out of brokenness and pain.

We come here on Easter morning as Mary came to the tomb. We come with our fears intact, with hearts hurting, with all the sorrow that we carry.

And we come here to be reminded, to encounter once again the miraculous truth that is also not confined to history. The good news that is as true today as it was when Christ called Mary by name in the dim morning light.

The worst thing is not the last thing.

God can do extraordinarily beautiful things, with dust and ashes.

God has done extraordinarily beautiful things, with dust and ashes.

God will do extraordinarily beautiful things, with dust and ashes.