

Maundy Thursday Service
April 13, 2017
“In the Darkness”
Psalm 70

Introduction

I once heard a minister say that the way Easter is celebrated is directly related to whether Easter comes before or after April 15. If Easter comes before April 15, he said, the celebration is never as festive. There is a cloud hanging over the services. But if Easter is later and April 15 has already come, the celebration is more joyous. Because, he says, the two guaranteed tests of life, taxes and death, have been met and defeated.

But this year, since the deadline for filing taxes has been extended, we are facing the two tests at the same time.

If you went to an Ash Wednesday service six weeks ago today, you were told you are ashes and to ashes you will return. Then for six weeks we have heard reminders about our sinfulness and our mortality. Our worship has included slow, solemn hymns about suffering and sorrow and our unworthiness. We are ready for the tests to be over, payment made, and death defeated. But before we get there, we have to pass through the dark, lonely days of Holy Week.

I

And that is why you are here. It is in our faith that we face our greatest joy and our deepest sorrow. And this week we meet the sorrow. We hear words of distress in the upper room. We hear words of betrayal and grief in the garden of Gethsemane. We hear agony from the cross.

I think I understand how Jesus felt when he said, “I am deeply grieved, *even to death.*” I know I understand how the disciples felt—the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

Have we not all grieved over something?

Have we not all been overwhelmed by anxiety?

Have we not all at times pleaded with the Psalmist: “I am poor and needy, God, and I need your help. And I need it now. Please hurry, Lord!”

II

Writer Anne Lamott tells the story of a mother whose two-year-old son accidentally locked himself in a room one night. She heard him calling for her, “Mommy! Mommy!”

She could not open the door from the outside, so she kept saying, “Just jiggle the doorknob, honey.” But he did not understand, because he was so afraid and sobbing so hard.

The mother did not know what else to do. Finally she fell to her knees and simply slid her fingers beneath the door in the space between the bottom of the door and the floor. She told her son to kneel and find her fingers. Finally he did.

They stayed like that for a long time, on the floor touching fingers in the dark. Finally, he stopped crying. Once he was calm, she gently said, “Now stand up and jiggle the doorknob.” He did, and after a while the door popped open.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that is our picture. We are the two-year-old in the dark, and God is the parent, trying to rescue us, but we are so afraid and upset that we do not understand what God is saying to us.

Why are we always in the dark?

Why does not God just break the door down and rescue us?

Does God not know how much the darkness frightens us?

“Why can’t this cup be passed? Father, all things are possible for you. Take this cup away from me.”

We have been where Jesus was that Holy Week so long ago. And when we get to that point, all we can do is reach out for the fingers in the darkness.

III

We came into this Holy Week from a weekend of acts of terror and acts of war mixed with acts of nature, including fires and tornadoes. We are overwhelmed, and we feel like helpless children in the dark.

When we hear “You are not alone, God is with you,” we feel like the little boy who said to his mother, “I know you say God is here, but I need somebody with skin. I need someone with a face.” We need to feel you, God. We need your help, and we need it now. Could you hurry?

It has been 23 years now, and still every time spring tornadoes come around Holy Week I think of the Goshen United Methodist Church in Piedmont, Alabama, and Palm Sunday 1994. The congregation had gathered for a music program that involved adults and children.

At 11:32 a.m., the electricity failed, the sanctuary went dark, a window broke, and then the building exploded. Eighty-six people were injured. Nineteen people died, including six children. Among the dead was Pastor Kelly Clem's four-year-old daughter, Hannah.

Over the next few days, Kelly performed one funeral after another, including one for her own daughter. In the midst of the chaos and the trauma of the week, people started saying, “We are not having Easter, are we? There is no way we can

have Easter.”

But when a reporter asked if the disaster had shattered Kelly’s faith, she replied, “It has not diminished my faith. I am holding on to my faith, and faith is holding me up. And we are holding on to each other. We are people of faith and hope and love. Do not forget, Easter is coming.”

That Sunday morning at an Easter sunrise service, two hundred people gathered in the front yard of the destroyed facilities of Goshen United Methodist Church. With a bandage on her head, her shoulder in a brace, and her heart broken with grief, Rev. Kelly made her way to the makeshift pulpit. She opened her Bible, looked into the faces of her traumatized congregation, and then read these words from Romans 8, “For I am convinced that . . . nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Years later, Kelly’s husband, Dale, also a minister, reflected on the journey of their grief. “There is a difference,” he said, “between wanting to figure out God and wanting to feel close to God. Ultimately I have realized that the abiding, peaceful presence of the Lord is enough. That is what we want. That is what we need.”

Conclusion:

Sunday morning we will smile and greet people in the bright light of day.

There will be flowers. There will be alleluias.

But here mid-week, we are still in the dark. And it feels like a long, lonely road yet to travel.

In the darkness, reach out for the Lord.

Reach out for each other in the communion of the Lord.

And do not forget, “Easter is coming.”

Amen.