

Romans 14:1-9
John 19:19-29
“Dying is Not Dead is Living”

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We are faced with one fundamental question this morning that we must answer before we leave here. In fact, we can't leave here, we can't get out of here, without answering this question. The question is: what kind of community do we want to be? This is not a question that we could have answered last week. Frankly, there were too many people here last week for us to be able to answer this question. I like the crowds just as much as you do, perhaps. After everything was said and done last week, several of you came up to me and said, “Didn't you just love to see all the people here today?” We had just shy of 300 people in worship here at Four Corners last week. “Don't you wish the place was packed like that every week?” Yes, I suppose I do. But here we are. It's just one week later and it's back to you and me, and I got to tell you, I'm okay with it. I don't think you can measure the health of a church based on its membership rolls or the turnout on Easter Sunday. You have to look at who's in the pews the week after. After the party is over, after the last guest has left, after you've picked up all the empty cans and bottles from around the house and loaded everything into the dishwasher and you sit down in the living room, you look to see who's left and that's you ask, what are we going to do now? It's a fundamental question because it's a question of the heart.

It's the question the disciples of Jesus find themselves asking today. According to John, it's evening on Easter. It's been quite a day for them, too. No egg hunts, no dinner with the family. Just news that their beloved Jesus is not in the tomb where he's supposed to be. After watching this man whom they gave up everything to be with—all their livelihood, all their material possessions—they gave it all up to travel the countryside with him, to be there in the front row to hear every teaching, every sermon he ever gave—when he did something for the poor, they tried to do it too; what he said to believe in, they tried to believe in; he had become their conscience and they had given up everything to be with him so they could be like him. But when he said, come and die with me for the things we believe in, they all thought he was joking. No one thought he was actually going to do it. No one but Thomas. He was the only one who said, “Let us go and die with him.” So when the authorities came to take him away, when Pilate declared him an enemy of the state and the

Jewish leaders all nodded in agreement, when the soldiers executed him on a cross in plain sight, everyone acted all surprised, like they didn't see it coming. Afterwards, his body was taken down and put in a tomb. A really big stone was rolled over the entrance and a guard was put in place to keep watch, just to make sure no one could come along and steal the body and then try to pass Jesus off as not really being dead. This was all three days ago. Then, this morning, a few women came to tell them that they had gone to the tomb and indeed, the body was not there. Has it been stolen? No, the women report, Jesus has been raised.

What now? What are we going to do now? They all wonder. I wonder what we all did last Sunday after we left here, after we heard the report. Did we leave here to go and forgive someone? Who did we go out and heal? What peace did we make because the tomb was emptied and we believed the report? Hearing that Jesus has reentered the world, what do the disciples do? They run and hide. They tell themselves, what if the report isn't true? What if the authorities think we stole the body and they come for us next? Wounded by doubt, afraid to believe, they lock the doors and throw away the key.

What now? What are we going to do now?

This morning I want to give us three, short, possible answers to this question, and I want to frame my answers by giving us three images of three different rooms. John says that on Easter the disciples were in a room, but it was a dark, confining room in which no one could move about and no one could get out for fear of who or what might be on the other side of the door. I'd like to help us imagine a different kind of room for ourselves.

The first room, the first image, I want to give us is that of a pawn shop. In her book, *"Traveling Mercies,"* Anne Lamott talks about what it was like the first time she wandered into a church. She was an adult who had spent most of her life as an addict who was now a recovering addict. She had one son named Sam, who at that time was 6. He did not want to go to church but she made him go because, in her words, he was the child, I was the adult, and I outweighed him by 125 pounds. Not well put together, prone to abusive relationships, and not feeling particularly worthy of belonging or love, she wandered into Saint Andrew's Presbyterian Church where a group of elderly women immediately noticed her and started giving her bags of dimes and coupons for things she and Sam might need. I stayed there and am there still, she says. Going to church is like being on the top shelf of a

pawn shop. Dusty and nearly forgotten, and one day Jesus walks in and pointing up at us says, "I'll take that one. Let that one go outside again."¹

Catholic priest and author Henri Nouwen says that, "The great spiritual call of the beloved children of God is to pull their brokenness away from the shadow of the curse and put it under the light of the blessing."

What now? What are we going to do now? "I'll take that one. Let that one go outside again."

The second image I want to give us today is that of a waiting room at a doctor's office. I came across this image a couple weeks ago when visiting with Marcia Green's mother, Vivian. Vivian is 93 and lives in a lovely retirement community in Hingham and up until recently was able to get around still pretty easily. She could walk herself down to the dining hall for her meals, work as an usher at their little community movie theater, enjoy conversing with the other residents on her floor. But lately the cancer in Vivian's body is making her more and more tired. She doesn't feel up to going down to the dining hall these days and she's thinking about what's next. On the day I visited her, I asked her if she had any good friends she could talk to.

"No. I'm sick and dying. Who wants to be around someone like that all the time? I haven't even really told anyone that I have cancer."

It was a brave and honest admission, I thought, and I was trying to think of what to say next when no sooner she added, "Except there is this one person, a nice gentleman, who lives just down the hall. He and I used to talk about all kinds of things, and the other day I was in the waiting room at my oncologist's, and I looked up and there he was at the counter checking in. I didn't know he had cancer, and I've never told him about mine."

"Did you talk to each other that day in the waiting room?" I asked her.

"No. I went over to see him and he did the strangest thing. He smiled at me and then put his hands on my head. Both hands. He left them there for the longest time. Then he just went and sat down."

"How did that make you feel?"

¹ I tell this story of Lamott as a recollection of my years reading her books. The story is not a direct quotation.

“Well, I don’t like people putting their hands on my head. But I guess it made me feel like I wasn’t alone after all. Like he was saying, who knew? I guess you never really can tell who’s living and who’s dying.”

It’s one of the great truths of all good religion, I think, that the dying are also the living. In hospice we talk about how to die well, but we are careful never to separate this question from its counterpoint, which is, how do we live well? If the wounded, crucified, resurrected Jesus has anything to tell us it’s that not only are the dying worthy of living but the dead are also worthy of living, and that as people of the church, as Easter people, we must insist upon this.

The third and final image I want to give us this morning comes from an experience I had just this past Thursday evening when I visited a church in Grafton, MA with Rhonda Hanson and, again, Marcia Green. The church was called “Simple Church” and was a congregation of the United Methodist Church. I learned about this church through an article I read recently and I just had to go and check it out. The pastor, a guy named Zach, greeted us at the door wearing a baseball cap, a flannel shirt, and blue jeans. I took one look at him and told myself that I’d take whatever he was having.

He ushered us into an open room in the basement of a church that he said was just rented space for them. On either side of the room were tables with empty glasses, a pitcher of water, and a vase with a few flowers dangling over the side. Diagonal to these was a third table on which would soon be set a big pot of homemade vegetable soup and whatever else people might show up with to share. After a few minutes, more people came in. No one was dressed up, though a few looked like they must have just come from work. The children all seemed to be dressed in their pajamas and were running around rather wildly, like they owned the place, which Zach said they did. When about 30 people were there, Zach said, “Well, that’s everyone.” He strummed a few chords on his guitar to get everyone’s attention as we launched into “This Little Light of Mine.” After we sang, Zach asked what he said was “the question we ask every week.” “What do we want to make happen here tonight?”

What do we want to make happen here? I’ll admit, as a pastor I thought it was a little late to be asking. I mean, what pastor waits until everyone has arrived before asking what’s going to happen next? We show up on Sunday morning and everyone gets their

own bulletin. It tells us what's happening from start to finish. Before Saturday is over, I've written the whole sermon down, word for word, and all the prayers too. Yet, I love this question. What do we want to make happen here? Because despite all appearances, I alone am not in charge. This service is not mine. It is ours to imagine, and ours to expect. That God will show up and surprise us with a grace far greater than we could ever plan for. What do we want to make happen here? Well...what do you say? To make light...to make gratitude...to make rest...to make laughter and joy and resurrection. I'll say, I'll have what you're having.

Amen.