

Grief Interrupted

Luke 24: 36-48

Sunday, April 19, 2015

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The Congregational Church of Needham

I don't know about you, but I cherish my morning routine. I am taking a guess that a morning routine is so much harder to keep when parents try to get their children off to school but it is something to look forward to in the future. Upon rising I make my way to the coffee maker which was set the night before to provide me with a hot steaming cup of Joe, and then I plunk myself down for about 20 minutes to catch up on the news. If I want an update on traffic and weather, I turn on NECN first, and then I flip back and forth between CBS, ABC, and NBC. When it comes to morning TV, I have a serious problem with attention deficit.

But on Wednesday, April 15, 2015 all stations reported on one event: the quiet ceremonies at which banners were unfurled to mark the 2nd anniversary of the Boston Marathon Bombing. Mayor Walsh and Governor Baker were joined that morning by a good number of people - survivors and first responders among them, but also the by the family of 8 year old Martin Richard who lost his life. Two other people lost their life that day, on April 15, 2013: Lingzi Lu and Krystle Campbell. And nearly 300 others were injured, for many of whom life has changed forever. If it would not have been for an army of well-trained first responders, the death toll would have been much greater I believe.

As if the bombing was not enough, the three days that followed were equally upsetting. While tracking down the perpetrators Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Zarnajev, Sean Collier, an MIT police officer also lost his life, and another police officer almost died. Tamerlan was killed in a shootout with police in Watertown, and his brother has just stood trial and was found guilty on all 30 counts of senseless violence.

This act to terrorism and violence has left its mark on us although we have tried to "get back to normal." The slogan *Boston Strong* was there to give us our courage back and maybe to restore our faith in humanity. Much good was done. A lot of money was raised for the 35 to 40 people worst hurt, who lost one leg or both legs in the attack, so they can have the best of prosthetics. We have followed their recovery stories, buried the dead,

built memorials, watch or run the marathon again, and put the surviving bomber brother on trial. His sentencing awaits. I wonder if we will feel better if we kill him? Passions run strong on both sides of this.

We have tried very hard to “get back to normal” which is where we want to go, but we know deep down that we can’t. What we have witnessed on April 15, 2013 does not allow us to get back to normal.

The disciples in the gospel of Luke are kind of in the same boat as we are. They had witnessed their friend’s arrest, and trial and brutal execution. Jesus was dead, and the disciples feared for their own lives. They’ve kept a low profile by hiding out. They stayed together to grieve, but also to wonder about what to do next. Their leader, teacher, and friend was gone, and it seemed all there was left to do was to try to “get back to normal,” returning to the old life they knew before they met Jesus and followed him.

But their grief was interrupted. The news of the empty tomb was startling and the message that “he is risen” a surprise but then dismissed it as an idle tale. Experience has taught them that dead bodies stay dead. Why should it be different this time around? Resurrection seems such an impossible possibility.

Slowly but surely the disciples realize Jesus’ presence in their lives. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus recognized him in the meal they share together. When the disciples had gathered back in Jerusalem, Jesus joined in the upper room, invites them to touch him, and to share food with him.

Jesus had come back not really to give them the surprise of their lives, but he had come with a message. “You are the witnesses to everything that I have said and done and taught. You are the witnesses not just to the life I have lived and the ministry I have fulfilled, but you are the witnesses to God’s promise – that the Messiah will rise from the dead on the third day. You are to be witnesses to it all.” I am paraphrasing a little.

Think about it, those disciples had an unbelievable task to fulfill: not only to live and believe the resurrection story for themselves but to tell the story again and again to help others to believe it so they can live it and tell it. If we really think about it, and I know I should not say this, it is a crazy story to tell to anybody, and to tell it in a way that it is believed and acted upon by people would even be harder.

But that is what the disciples did, and somehow the story never stopped being told. Billions of Christians are proof of that. The first disciples were the first responders to the good news of the resurrection life. Without them, the little group of Jesus followers might have disappeared and forgotten for good.

“You are witnesses of these things.” We are. Thank you, Jesus, for reminding us.

Because resurrection we need. Left to our own devices, left to the way in which life returns back to normal after Easter, left to our routines, left to planning our summer getaways or signing the kids up for camp, left to planning confirmations, graduations, youth Sundays, and mission trips – it is all too easy to forget about resurrection.

Easter Sunday, only two weeks past, seems like an eternity ago. And in many ways, it is. Because that’s how it works. The church goes on. Life goes on. Since Christ has been raised we have been busy here at the church and in our daily lives.

Resurrection has the tendency to be a less than present reality, more likely a claim about a past event or a future assurance. Why is the presence of resurrection often overlooked? Understated? Even denied? Why do we seem to be more comfortable keeping resurrection in the past or postponing its promises for the future? Why is it so difficult? What are we afraid of?

Why is resurrection life, here and now, so hard to see?

I suspect there are a lot of reasons why but I think that the main reason is fear; fear of rejection; fear that it could really be true. Seriously, what if the testimony of the women at the tomb was true? We are in good company when it comes to these fears. Why is good news rarely accepted at the first hearing?

Because rejection is easier than resurrection. If the resurrection is true, well then, there goes life as we knew it. In the words of Anna Carter Florence, “if dead people don’t even stay dead, what is there to count on?” (Preaching Moment #10)

Maybe we have learned to live life too deeply in the consciousness of death. Wasn’t it Benjamin Franklin who said: “Only two things in life are guaranteed? Death and Taxes.”

It seems that we have all too many reminders of death and not enough reminders of life. Globally, nationally, communally, personally, the presence of death is more palpable than the promise of life.

Just in the past few weeks a dear friend of mine, once vibrant and alive, lives life now in the throes of chemo and endless doctor's visits; another friend struggling with ailments that won't go away, another one anticipating heart surgery. We are surrounded with aging parents needing more help, friends who struggle through depression, mothers and fathers working too many hours trying to put enough food on the table and trying to provide a decent life for their children, people who can't get a leg up in the job market, or listening to stories of broken relationships and then realizing some of your own. We all know these and have lived these kinds of weeks.

Life, here and now, can be very hard to see. In the end, I think being resurrection people takes effort - a lot of effort. And some weeks will demand more effort than others because all too often we have to carve meaning out of the life or situation we have been handed – not just for ourselves but also for the people we live with and love.

Jesus knows this reality, our reality; and knows that we need a reminder. In fact, we probably need a lot of them, daily perhaps. Notice the tense of Jesus' assertion -- not "you were," not "you will be," but "you are." I have a feeling Jesus takes that seriously. You are witnesses, here and now, in this moment; in this life; in your daily life; for the sake of life. Jesus reminds us of who we really are -- resurrection people, resurrection witnesses.

Let me close with a reminder of what resurrection life looks like to me. Meet Heather Abbott. Heather can rock a pair of heels with such confidence you'd never know one of her legs is prosthetic.

Abbott, 40, of Newport, R.I., was at the finish line of the 2013 Boston Marathon when the bombs went off, severely damaging her left leg. After three surgeries in four days, Abbott decided to have doctors amputate her left leg below the knee.

Just four months following the bombing, she was living independently and returned to her job as a Human Resources Manager, on a part time basis. Within the first year following her amputation, she started participating in the activities she loves, including paddle boarding, running and wearing high heels. Abbott has not let this horrific act of terrorism slow her down. She has become certified as a Peer Counselor by the

National Amputee Coalition and is helping other amputees adjust to their “new normal,” as an example of hope and determination.

Heather Abbott has remained a model of strength and resilience, truly personifying the popular phrase “Boston Strong,” since the city was shaken by this senseless act of violence. She is sharing her story with audiences across the country and inspiring others with her contagious optimism and thoughtful reflection on her journey.

While she was recovering, she learned a single prosthetic leg can cost more than \$100,000. She decided to found an organization to help provide other amputees with customized prosthetics after talking to a teenage girl born with a leg deformity.

"When I told her how much my leg cost, she said, 'I guess I can ask my parents if I can get my leg or if I can go to college,'" Abbott recalled. "I knew I had to do something."

The Heather Abbott Foundation provides customized prosthetics to people who have lost limbs through traumatic injury, with a special focus on women and young girls. (Source: Story materials taken from Heather Abbott's Foundation Website and from “Boston Marathon bombing survivors: Where are they now?” USA TODAY, March 27, 2015 by Natalie DiBlasio)

Resurrection life. Heather embraced her's. May we embrace ours. Amen