“Last November, on a gorgeous autumn afternoon, Presbyterian pastor Joe Harvard was in Duke’s football stadium watching the Blue Devils play Georgia Tech. The roar was deafening, but he felt his cell phone vibrating in his pocket. He flipped it open and said to his good friend, ‘Hello, Leigh.’ Leigh and her husband, David, and their four young children were staying at Mission Haven in Decatur, Georgia, waiting for visas so they could move to Sao Paulo, Brazil to serve as mission workers with the Presbyterian Church of Brazil.”

“A few months earlier, David had completed a Ph.D. in Old Testament at Duke. Everyone knew David as bright, insightful, and sensitive. What a gift he and his family would be to the church! Everyone was excited about their future.”

“How are you doing, Leigh?” Joe asked with enthusiasm.

She replied, “I have some bad news, Joe.” He immediately left the stands to find a place where he could hear. She said, “This morning David collapsed while running with a close friend, and died.”

“Joe and so many others were devastated by the tragic news. What sense can you make of the death of a 38yr-old who was a devoted father and husband with a promising future serving the church?”

Hits pretty close to home, doesn’t it? Our church family knows all too well how tragic it is to lose a bright, 30something young man with a promising future in the church.

The Friday following Joe’s phone call, First Presbyterian Church in Durham was packed with friends and family, in the same way our sanctuary was overflowing last June. As we grieved the loss of our Chad, they grieved the loss of their David. As we did, they came together in the midst of their pain and despair, to do what they needed to do. As we did, they gathered in the presence of God to bring their lament, their disbelief, their tears, and their pain to worship, seeking some glimmer of light in the darkness of sudden death.

This morning’s passage from the Gospel of Luke is also about a 30something young man with an incredibly promising future. He, too, had his life cut short. Yet, he did not suddenly die while running with a friend or kayaking down a river; he was unjustly sentenced to death, tortured and killed in one of the most brutal methods ever devised. After being crucified, just outside the gates of Jerusalem, his body was placed in a nearby tomb as the sun was setting on the Sabbath.
Then, according to the Gospel of Luke, at dawn on Sunday morning, several women walked to the tomb. They carried spices they had prepared to anoint his lifeless body and we can imagine their silence and their sadness as they approached this barren place of death. The tomb was not only a place of sorrow because it held the body of their crucified Master, it also represented all of their hopes that had died with him.

We know the searing pain of losing a beloved pastor, a spouse, a parent, a friend. We, too, have been to the tomb. We know the feeling of helplessness when our child or our neighbor’s child becomes addicted to drugs or alcohol. We have been to the tomb. We know the look of desperation in one who is mentally ill. We have been to the tomb. We know the tragedy of children being abused by people we thought we could trust. We have been to the tomb. Each Sunday we list the names of young men and women who are flown to Dover in flag-draped coffins from Iraq and Afghanistan. We have been to the tomb.

When the women went to the tomb of Jesus, they carried with them not only spices, but also their grief, their pain and their despair. But when they reached the tomb, the stone was rolled away from the entrance, and when they stepped inside, the body of their Lord was missing. The women were baffled and tried to make sense of what had happened. Had someone come in the dark of night and stolen his body? Was this one more cruel action they must bear?

Then, something unexpected pierced their darkness. Something happened that was difficult to believe. Luke says, “Suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen.’”

The two messengers from God delivered head-spinning news that left them terrified, yet amazed; perplexed, yet inspired. It was difficult to believe because it sounded too good to be true. The women dashed off to tell the apostles what had happened, and Luke says: “But these words seemed to [the apostles] an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” New Testament scholars have concluded from this verse that none of these guys were married. Married men know you are cruisin’ for trouble if you don’t listen to the women!

Actually, I don’t think the apostles would have believed the story if men had told them. Ten of the apostles told Thomas they had seen the risen Christ and he doubted them. The women found it difficult to believe, and when they told the apostles, the men found it difficult to believe. But it was not long before all of them became convinced that the resurrection of Jesus was true. In fact, the apostles believed it more than anything else they had ever believed. Their experience of the risen Christ was so life-transforming, that they changed from men who were afraid and who denied their relationship with Jesus, to men who would be put to death for their fierce faith in him.

Since the very beginning, people have been skeptical about the news of Christ’s resurrection. Many have thought it was simply an idle tale, silly talk, nonsense! It is healthy to ask questions and not to dismiss our doubts too quickly. However, we must also be open to possibilities that go beyond what can be proven by the five senses. No first century spin doctor could have transformed the women and the disciples from terrified and fearful doubters to dedicated evangelists exploding with good news to share with others. No memorial society dedicated to their crucified Master, could have converted their deep sorrow into overwhelming joy. No wishful thinking could have resurrected such courage and such hope from the despair of Friday when their whole world collapsed in darkness. No mere rumor could have spread around the planet and lasted throughout the centuries creating the world’s largest religion.
We live our lives believing that the visible world is all there is; OR we believe it is not all there is. We live our lives believing that what we can touch is all there is; OR we recognize feelings deep within our bones of realities we cannot fully grasp. We live our lives believing only in what we can conceive and explain OR we realize that there is also mystery – powers and worlds beyond what our minds can fathom.

The resurrection of Christ declares that there is more to the world than we can see or touch or imagine. The resurrection of Christ declares that while death marks the end of our physical nature, it is the first step in the transformation to our spiritual existence. The resurrection of Christ declares that the Creator of heaven and earth is a God of new beginnings, and therefore we can live our lives full of hope.

Hope keeps us moving forward when things are at their worst, when the forecast looks dismal, when a better day seems impossible. Hope motivates us to keep going after the doctor has said “I’m sorry, but you have cancer.” Hope compels us to crawl out of bed and keep looking for a job after months of dead ends. Hope drives us to keep fighting for a just cause in the face of overwhelming odds. Hope inspires us to keep living, loving and laughing even after a precious loved one is gone. Hope quells our anxiety and fosters an inner peace even when we must walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

Remember, death can come years before a person actually takes his/her final breath. Death comes when we no longer have hope. Hope enables us to say, “I’m looking forward to…I can’t wait until… Won’t it be great when…?

William Willimon recalls a funeral he officiated a few years ago. He says that Carol’s husband died after a brief illness. She was in shock and filled with sadness. They had been best friends for 40 years. At his funeral, Willimon met Carol and the funeral procession at the front door of the church where she was standing beside the casket.

Just before they began to walk down the aisle, as the church began singing an Easter song, she turned to him while pointing to the casket and said, “He never much cared for church. I pleaded with him to come with me, but he rarely did. And then a little smile began to break across her face and she said, “Well, he can’t resist now, so let’s take him in!”

It was a very Easter sort of moment when the pastor knew that she trusted the words of the Apostle Paul that “neither life nor death, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God.”

And so, despite the darkness that snatched the life of the one who preached love, we can sing, “Jesus Christ is Risen Today.” Despite our limited time on earth, we can sing, “The Day of Resurrection.” Despite the warring madness that grips our world, we can continue to sing “Hallelujah” because God is a God of resurrection. And that means that in the end, love will conquer hate, peace will conquer violence and life will conquer death.

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