

“The Location of Life”

April 16, 2017 Easter
John 20: 1-17 NRSV

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Mary went to the tomb while it was still dark. As she walked that morning, tired and still numb from all that had taken place, I imagine that a thought came to her. That thought was that this would be the first of many walks to the tomb. She wasn't going to forget him. Even though he was gone, she wasn't going to just get on with life and forget he lived. No, she knew that his tomb would become a familiar place for her.

She was grateful that the place where he laid was a nice place; a beautiful place. It was the one and only grace-note in a field of pain and hurt. She was somewhat familiar with the garden and where it was; it was a lovely location. As she walked she was very thankful that Joseph of Arimathea had provided the tomb -- he was wealthy and had given to Jesus the place where he himself had planned to be buried, so it was carefully chosen and special. She was thankful, because as she walked she suddenly knew that this was going to be her special place to come and find peace. She knew this would be the first trip of many to a place where she hoped she would take comfort in remembering Jesus and his words and his life and his love. That place. She hoped the place would help her heal.

Where do you go to find peace and healing in a world of pain? Do you have a special place? It's funny how cemeteries can sometimes be those places for us. I have always enjoyed walking to the Blue Church when I am at my parents' place. It's a short walk and a lovely setting for a cemetery. I've already bought my burial plots there. I bought them years ago when we were still living in Calgary. Maybe it's a side-effect of being in my profession -- I do so many funerals for all ages that I know more than most that life is short. And I also know funerals are expensive and it's just a good idea to prepare for the inevitable.

I remember the funeral directors laughing at the price of the two plots I purchased—just like housing, it's a whole lot cheaper in rural eastern Ontario than it is in downtown Calgary! My plot at the Blue Church overlooks the water and is big enough for two full-sized caskets or a number of urns, and it's marked by four little squares that say 'Heath'. As it's the only river-view property I own, I have always threatened to set up a chaise-lounge lawn chair and bring a pina-colada and sit and relax on my river-view property. ☺ Sun-tanning potential aside, it is a

beautiful and peaceful location, and I can't help but hope it still will be for generations to come.

Of course, that garden never did become a place of peace for Mary. In fact, it began as a place of terror. What she found seemed like a cruel joke, torment on top of torment. The tomb was empty. It seemed the grave had been desecrated, robbed. She ran to the disciples. After Peter and John checked out the scene for themselves and had left, Mary stayed and stood outside that empty tomb in grief and despair. Why could she not have had just this one place of peace? Was it not enough that they had taken his sacred life? Did they have to desecrate the tomb too?



When Rev. Anthony Bailey went to work last fall at Parkdale United Church in Ottawa, the place where he normally found peace and productivity, he was traumatized to discover that the walls of the church were spray-painted with swastikas and hateful racial slurs.

Rev. Bailey and many in the congregation are black.

Talk to any ethnic minority in this country and they will tell you that racism is alive and well in this country. That kind of expression of hate is bad enough, but as Bailey said in the victim impact statement “*The sight acted as a trigger for the memory and trauma of the murder of my brother John in Montreal some decades ago. Four men charged us with knives having yelled "Let's go kill these 'Ni—rs.' My brother bled to death in my arms on the street before help could arrive.*”

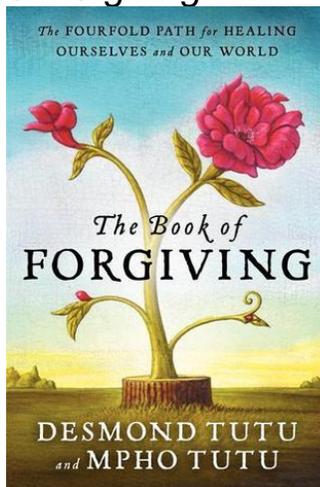
What does Easter mean in a broken and bloody world? We come to a beautiful sanctuary with flowers on Easter morning hoping for peace, but we are still haunted by knowledge that the Mother of All Bombs has been dropped (the largest in the U.S arsenal and the largest dropped since Hiroshima and Nagasaki) and we wonder what this means for our world. We come to church hoping to forget our own struggles and fears: the illness or loss of our loved one, the debt that is overwhelming, that broken relationship that hurts so much. Is Easter just a sprinkling of icing sugar on a cake of hurt and darkness? Is it a nice thought—a nice short little break from a reality that is anything but sweet? Is it window dressing for a horrible

view? A cute little Sponge-Bob-Square-Pants Band-Aid on a huge gaping wound? Where can we go to find lasting peace and healing?

On Wednesday for our last Lenten service Shirley Avery shared a Godly Play story about the journey of Lent through the cross and to Easter. She had a number of images that she laid out on the floor representing different stages of Jesus' life. The last image was double sided. It had Jesus with the crown of thorns on the one side symbolizing his torture and death and the image of Jesus with the bread and the wine on the other side, symbolizing his resurrection. Shirley told us that the two pictures couldn't be separated—that you couldn't have Easter without the cross, and you couldn't have the cross without the resurrection.

Jesus went through real torture and death. In Christian tradition, as the Apostles Creed makes mention, Jesus not only really died on Friday but on the Saturday, he descended into hell. So his death wasn't a nice, eternal-rest kind of death. It was hell. That's important. He couldn't have real life without having gone through real death.

A number of people in the congregation have been going through the course or reading on their own Archbishop Desmond Tutu's book *The Book of Forgiving*.



One of the things we are learning together is that you can't have real healing and the freedom that comes with forgiveness without first facing the real and sometimes brutal truth of the hurt that has taken place. The first step on the journey to forgiveness is telling your truth. But as we face that truth, as we walk through the darkness—by the grace of God we find real healing, real freedom and real life.

Easter is not a little oasis in a desert that we can enjoy for a weekend and then go back to the harsh realities of our lives and our world. Easter changes everything. Because of his great love for the world and all of it's brokenness—because of his great love for you and all of your brokenness—Jesus went to and through death. But death could not hold him. Something as horrible and dark as death could never hold a love like that. O grave where is your victory, death where is your sting?

Rev. Bailey had no illusions that the world is a good place. His security, his peace is not found in a place or a situation but in the person of the Risen Christ. It makes all the difference in the world. He makes all the difference in the world.

When asked about the hate crime Anthony Bailey said: "*It is shocking, but we as a congregation and as people of faith reject this. We are outraged, but we will not be deterred in our work for love and reconciliation, and bringing people together.*"

He doesn't just talk or preach it, he lives it. Rev. Bailey, along with members from the Muslim and Jewish communities who were also targeted last fall by the same troubled and hate-filled youth, have offered to help the teen who pleaded guilty. They have offered to work with the offender and participate in a Collaborative Justice model which "*is an approach to justice that focuses on repairing the harm caused by crime while holding the offender responsible for his or her actions by providing an opportunity for the parties directly affected by the crime —victim(s), offender and community—to identify and address their needs in the aftermath of a crime, and seek a resolution that affords healing, reparation and reintegration, and prevents future harm.*"

The judge will make a final decision at a sentencing hearing in May. Rev. Bailey has not gone this route because he's a nice guy, but because he's been through hell and knows the life, healing and forgiveness that can be found in walking the path of faith in the person of Jesus, crucified and risen.

As she stood firm in her grief and her fear, Mary did eventually find peace and healing in that garden—but it wasn't a place but a person who gave her those gifts. As she stayed and wept she heard her name being called: "Mary". She recognized his voice. Hearing his voice again calling her name was worth more than a 1,000 beautiful gardens.

I do believe in sacred space. There are places that mean something to us, perhaps because they meant something to someone we loved who is longer with us, or perhaps we've felt God's presence there.

Remember that the greatest place of peace and life is not a place at all, but a person. Jesus is alive. As you call for him, if you listen, you will hear him whispering your name and words of love that can heal your heart. Jesus rose from the grave and defeated death. Because he did, we can overcome the darkness of our past, and find healing and strength for the struggles and pain of our present and the evil in our world, as we choose to stand with and follow the Lord of Life. Thanks be to God. Amen.