

Unfolding Hope  
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 42:1-6a  
Reading from the Gospels: Mark 16:1-8

One thing we share in common is the truth we spend a lifetime avoiding; that somewhere along the way we will lose someone that we love. Now, that love may be characterized as a source of joy, wisdom, laughter, confidence, angst, unresolved anger, or some sweet and sour cocktail of all the above, but love lost is an experience felt deeply and for which we are seldom prepared.

The phone rings and well-practiced, engrained habit allows us to answer without the firing of instructional synapses. Who doesn't know how to answer the phone, after all? But if the call brings news of sudden and profound lost love, even the steps required to hang up overtax the mind's capacity to process. In the John Grisham movie, *The Firm*, upon hearing the news of a colleague's death, we find an attorney sitting fully clothed in a lawn chair, yet detached and dazed, not even realizing that the lawn sprinkler has completely drenched him, its metronomic spray offering the soundtrack to his glassy-eyed, vacant stare. A clinician might call it shock, but maybe desolation would be a more fitting word to describe that moment when life **with** suddenly becomes life **without**.

All circuits freeze, all screens go blank, your internal processor momentarily ceases to process.

More often than not, it doesn't last that long ... or ... it can't last that long ... or ... it isn't allowed to last that long. You see, loss, no matter how devastating, comes with a list. Where does the body go and what is to be done with it? Who do I need to call first? The mortuary? The cremation society? The church? Should I just *Google* bury the dead instructions? I should hurry up and make a list of everyone I need to let know. Will somebody call his mother, I just can't do that right now? Make a list, write a list, get a pen, that one doesn't work, grab a pencil. I wish I could call my mom. She'd know what to do. I better call his boss; he won't be in tomorrow. Where is the insurance policy? Who has the will? The hospital just called about picking up his personal items. I've got to find his phone and go through his contacts to know who and how to notify. Where's his computer? Rats, I don't know where I wrote down the password. Which suit would he want to wear? I guess it doesn't matter with cremation, but I know he loved the pinstripe. Where's my mind? I can't remember if I already called the preacher.

It seems *the list* has little patience with all-consuming devastation. In life's most vulnerable moments we are called upon to make a slew of decisions and plans out of a sense of deference to the cultural expectations of a society that has never dealt with death in a healthy way. We duck and dodge our way around all death-talk like a quarterback on a bad team scrambling away from a Hall of Fame defense. And that's a shame, particularly when you figure that death is one thing we inevitably share in common. "You're going to die? That's amazing, so am I!"

We do ourselves and those we love such a disservice when we evade or abort any talk around the subject of death. One of the greatest gifts parents can give their children, from their early years and forward, is to have healthy, honest, never dumbed-down conversations about death - yours, theirs, relatives, friends, and certainly, the strangers whose tragic deaths and lifeless bodies are paraded daily through our newsfeed. The prolific author and priest, Henri Nouwen, once wrote, "I have a deep sense, hard to articulate, that if we could really befriend death we would be free people. So many of our doubts and hesitations, ambivalences and insecurities are bound up with our deep-seated fear

of death that our lives would be significantly different if we could relate to death as a familiar guest instead of a threatening stranger.” (Henri

Nouwen, *A Sorrow Shared*)

The real tragedy about death is the way we are conditioned in life to fear it to such an extent that our clinging to life in dread of death shackles us and prevents us from fully living and relishing the days that we have. I think that in speaking of "befriending death", Nouwen isn't suggesting that we look forward to it or hasten it. Nor is he minimizing how painfully hard death is. Rather, I think he is suggesting that in honest conversation and life practice, we make peace with death's inevitability and find peace in the One who gives us life, holds us in death, and greets us in eternal fellowship. I believe this is what Paul is alluding to when he said, "For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him."

It truly is not morbid. Don't avoid the conversations that will free us to celebrate life and have peace with our mortality. And what a gift it is when we don't add the confusion of unprobed conversations to the

grief our loved ones will already be bearing when we die. We have no business spending this hour together today if the One who birthed us into this grand mystery called life is not there to catch us when we let go at the end of this life.

Confusion and desolation held the stage on that late Friday afternoon at a place called Golgotha. Disciples had fled. Followers had returned to life's daily demands. Authorities and religious potentates had returned to vigilant maintenance of their turf. Yet three women, one of whom may have been Jesus' mother (we're not really sure), stood by, witnessing the suffering of the One they so loved and the death of a dream they held so close. Having stood there inside the curtain of the ICU unit or Emergency department, you may well know the distress of watching someone suffer. It is horrendous and final goodbyes bring a level of pain heretofore unknown. And then that list intrudes far too soon.

For the women at the cross, the time of day becomes a crisis. There is no time for reflection or the planning of services or tracking down and coercing the disciples to arrange and make preparations for a burial. The Sabbath starts in what, two or three hours. Jesus must be

buried by then or else they won't be able to actually do anything with the body until the Sabbath is over according to Mosaic law, and Lord knows, the Romans won't make accommodations for that. Thanks to the generosity of Joseph of Arimathea, they have a place to put Jesus, but the time squeeze cuts short their ability to properly prepare his body for burial according to their customs. They don't have time for stages of grief. The list won't allow it, but in a way, that's a blessing, because the rush to do what they can, along with the demands of the Sabbath, divert their attention from things like despair and guilt and the plague of *what-ifs*.

However, the fog of loss remains with Mary, Mary, and Salome in the dark of Sunday morning as they rush around gathering burial spices without a plan for actually getting in the tomb, but they are doers who cannot abide a project half finished. In their obsessive haste to finish what they had started, they didn't even stop to consider that after three days, their offering of essential oils and spices will be a gift too little and too late to stem the stench of death.

The same terror that greeted them when the crowd shouted, "*Crucify him,*" returns as the women come upon an open tomb, and

inside, not a corpse, but a radiantly alive young man casually sitting by, certainly not strong enough to have gotten in there by himself. His words to them, which may seem straightforward to us, only seem to add to the women's distress. "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here ... go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

Mark ends his gospel with the women fleeing in distress and telling no one. We assume that at some point the shroud of death did clear and the women did speak, or else we would not be here. Yet, though Mark's ending seems ambiguous at first reading, what he leaves us is a profound invitation to suspend our world-weary disbelief long enough to reflect on those treasured moments when we have felt claimed and loved; those brief glimpses through the veil that separates earth and heaven; those Spirit blessed moments when our hearts sang, when we felt God's presence, sensed God's wisdom, heard God's call, experienced God's mercy, saw the love of God in the eyes of a neighbor. To reflect on those moments, to remember those sacred spaces is where

trust is born. *O God our hope in ages past, our hope in years to come; be thou our guard while life shall last, and our eternal home.*

Look at the text. The young guy in the tomb, the one dressed like Jamie from the Progressive commercial. What are his instructions? He has been raised. He is not here. He is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him.

Galilee. There you will see him ... Where was it that these women and all those disciples first encountered Jesus? \*\*\* Galilee. Where were they drawn to his teaching? \*\*\* Galilee. Where did they first feel the power and presence of a love so much more profound than anything they had known before? \*\*\* Galilee. Where did they feel the pull of Jesus' calling? \*\*\* Galilee. Where was it that they were so moved, they were willing to leave everything behind and follow? \*\*\* Galilee.

"He is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him." Do you see it? In their moment of desolation, the women are called to remember - when they heard Jesus' word; when they felt filled with the weight of his love; when they knew the one thing they could not do was ignore him. Ironically, it is often the case that trust is borne of



remembrance. When I encounter people in distress, I know not to tell them everything will be okay. For one thing, I don't know that.

Secondly, to suggest that would be to dismiss what they are experiencing. Additionally, what they are experiencing offers no evidence of a satisfactory resolution to their distress.

In that moment, the best I can do is to acknowledge the validity of their distress, and point them to Psalm 42, the gut-wrenching prayer of someone deep in desolation. "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God ... My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'" Well, that's a cheery thought to share with someone in distress. But you have to acknowledge what is before you can explore what could be.

And look at what the Psalmist does next. "These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival." Look at what's going on here. The Psalmist acknowledges this feeling that God is absent, and yet, can still remember when he felt God close, felt so full of God's joy

that he was the one at the head of the procession, leading the singing as the faithful entered worship. *O for a thousand tongues to sing...* And in that memory is the ladder by which he can climb from desolation to trust. "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God." Memory is transformed into trust and blooms with hope.

He has been raised. He is not here. He is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him. Amen.