

April 17, 2022  
Easter Day (C)  
United, Oak Park

### **Hope to Face the Future**

Sometimes going back to where you once were is simply too difficult to consider. Nearly two years *after* I had been downsized out of an editorial position that I truly liked, I found it difficult to re-enter the office building where I had once gone to work every day. Of course it wasn't the building that challenged me, it was the people who I thought I might run into—the people who had worked on projects with me, and especially those who had made the decisions about which positions to cut. How could I face them as if nothing had happened?

I've known widows and widowers who find it challenging to be in some of the same places and do some of the same things that they once did with a spouse. There are simply too many difficult memories. For a number of folks, even coming to worship can be a challenge, if that's an activity that they shared with a deceased spouse for quite a long time. So the very relationships that could be a support for a person who is dealing with grief could also be too painful of a reminder to face.

Might it not have been something like that, as reported in the gospel according to Luke, for the faithful women who came back to the tomb planning to make the final preparations with Jesus' body for burial? We can well imagine that those who returned did not want to enter the tomb and be reminded of what seemed to be a failed mission. They didn't want to face the *pain* of the *past*.

But their faith helped them to return to the scene of destruction and ruin. Indeed they did come back to face what had to be done. Maybe they thought on that Sunday morning that in time they would learn something from their recent defeats and move on. But just how, they didn't exactly know now. Would God find a way for them, just as God had found a way for people before them who had come up face to face with disappointments and dashed hopes?

God had liberated and restored the Israelites who had been in bondage to Pharaoh in Egypt. God restored the world in the time of Noah, when everything seemed corrupted and a total loss. God renewed Ezekiel's vision, just when it seemed as if everything was beyond restoration. According to those well-known stories, hope was possible, even if it seemed far off for the core group of Christ's followers.

So the faithful women returned to Jesus' tomb. There they were, wondering how they were going to roll away the stone, when suddenly to their amazement, the stone had *already* been rolled back.

How many times do we find ourselves standing in front of the disappointments of our lives? We're disappointed about not having made our mark on the world by the time we're 30, or 40, or 50. We're disappointed that our children don't seem to have the same values as we do. We're disappointed that we didn't get admitted to the school that was our *first* choice, because our test scores weren't quite *good* enough. We're disappointed that friends have let us down, and that they've told something about us to someone else that we didn't want repeated. And so we stand before the tomb ourselves. We stand before the wreckage of our valleys of dry bones.

Indeed it's tough work at times to come face to face with what our lives are. But first we must face the way things *are* in order for us to understand just what it is that we have yet to do. We must get a clear picture of just what it is like *now* before we can imagine what things

could be like in the future. The first step to a new future involves facing the reality of what has been lost.

In moments of such honesty, though, we can also remember *who* we are. One of the most significant aspects of our Easter celebration is that it helps us to remember who we are. We are a people who by our baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ have been saved for eternal life! But remembering this story *today* is only a small part of what this aspect of our faith means for us. Each day there is an opportunity for us to remember that Christ *has conquered* the forces of darkness and given us new life.

To keep remembering who we are, we need the stories from the Bible that give us purpose and meaning. We need stories of hope that have proven to be helpful for generations in order for us to face the constantly changing world that often bewilders us and that causes us to forget who we are. We also need the support of other people of faith who have faced immense challenges in their lives, yet who still can sing out with an “Alleluia.”

The truth is that we all face dark Good Fridays of our own. How many of us have lost jobs, experienced the end of a marriage or a significant relationship, or dealt with the death of a close relative?

How many of us have mourned over the changes that have occurred to our neighborhoods, or more particularly to this congregation? Like thousands of other congregations these days, United Lutheran Church does not have as many people as it did in the decades when nearly everyone in the community was raising a family and trying to find a place for their children to go to Sunday school. So this congregation faces the challenge of needing to do ministry a bit differently than it did in previous decades.

And yet we are doing exactly that. Within this past year we have begun supplying food to one of the programs at A House in Austin, and it has given us new opportunities to see how God is working through us to become partners with an organization that has become a great resource in that community. We still have plenty of ways that we can perform God's mission around us.

Did our ancestors in the faith just give up because things got difficult? No. Our scriptures, as well as stories of people within our own

families, remind us that our ancestors in the faith stuck at it. They knew that lots of people before them had faced difficult times, so they kept on building and imagining a better world for them and for their children.

While it may indeed be work for us to remember the ancient stories of faith and to learn from them, we do not have to do this task alone. Together with other Christians we can recall the old stories of God's promises to people who faced hardship and loss—not only so that we claim them for ourselves—but so that we can go on to tell those stories to others so that they will come to know our joy as well.

We are all called to support and encourage one another as we live through the challenges of our lives. Perhaps this is one of the primary lessons we have to learn from the first Easter morning when the faithful women came together to the tomb. They knew that neither one of them could be in that place alone, but *together* they could support one another in the work they had to do.

The church's scriptures are among the only stories that we can regularly return to in order to find strong words of encouragement in

the midst of all the discouraging news of our world—from school closures to financial markets to a war in Ukraine.

We who gather each week to hear from and be formed by these scriptures are also a people who can continue to restore one another's faith in a God who will finally triumph over all, because collectively we have stared down some of the most difficult challenges in our lives and have survived.

We ourselves have lived to tell numerous stories that are in their own ways quite miraculous, and we graft them onto the stories we also know from our Old and New Testaments.

Now with that kind of faith we can live through the darkest of nights. Because we remember the joyful news of the first Easter Sunday, because we remember the love that conquered evil, and because we believe that day after day God has been calming our fears, we know that God also *lives in us*.