

“TEARS OF SORROW, TEARS OF JOY”

Karen F. Bunnell

Elkton United Methodist Church

April 8, 2012

Easter Sunday

John 20:1-18

When my alarm went off at 4:30 a.m. this morning, I thought of Mary Magdalene. It was pitch black outside, much like it was on that first Easter morning when, in the wee hours of the dawn, she left her home and went to the tomb where Jesus had been buried. She was all alone, and that's probably the way she wanted it, because she was a woman deep in grief. I can almost picture her in my mind's eye - a shawl wrapped around her shoulders bent with grief, her eyes puffy and swollen from hours on end of weeping, her head aching and her heart hurting from the grief of losing this man so dear to her, a hole in her soul that she was sure would never be filled again. She was in a terrible place that first Easter morning.

Everything in her life, her world, had been shattered. She had come so far since meeting Jesus. He had totally changed her life. She had been possessed by demons, and she struggled mightily in other ways throughout her life. She was lost and lonely until she met Jesus. He transformed her. He treated her with dignity and respect when everyone else had treated her with disdain. He spent time with her, healed her, led her into the path of new life. She was a new person because of Him. It was good, so good - and then, He was taken away, horribly, brutally, agonizingly on a cruel cross.

His death plunged Mary Magdalene into deep, deep grief. The light went out of her life, and she was hopeless once again.

In grief, she made her way to the garden. It was the only thing she knew to do. She wanted to be near Him. She wanted to be near the last place she had seen Him. She had to do something, and the only thing she knew to do, was go to his grave.

She went alone, because the others who had been around Jesus, His disciples, were nowhere to be seen. They had gone off to their own places to mourn in their own way. He had changed their lives as well, and they had given up so much to follow Him. They had done things by His side that they never thought they could do, they had seen Him do amazing, life-changing things - and now, He was gone. And in the silence of their homes, they wept tears of sorrow, mourning their Lord and Master, weighed down by the shame of knowing that they failed Him when He

needed them the most.

So many people were weeping on that first Easter morning - inconsolable, in shock, hopeless, afraid of what was to come. You know, there are people in the world, actually, people here in this place today, who know what that's like. There are people in our midst, in our church family today, who know the unbelievable shock and sadness of losing a loved one suddenly and tragically. It happened twice in our extended church family just this week. And there are others who come here today having wiped tears from their faces before they came, tears because they don't know how they're going to feed their kids, let alone pay their bills; or because their spouse has told them they're in love with someone else; or because they or someone they love just got chilling news from a doctor; or because their family is a mess, or one of their children is fighting addiction. So many of you know what Mary Magdalene and the disciples were feeling on that first Easter morning - the deep grief, the tears of sorrow.

When Mary got to the tomb, she had no idea that her heart would soon break even more - because when she got there, she discovered that the stone that had been rolled over the entrance of the tomb in which Jesus was laid, had been rolled away - and the tomb was empty. You can almost hear her shouting, "No! No! What have they done? They've taken away His body. Why couldn't they leave Him alone? Didn't they brutalize Him enough? Why? Why?"

And in terror, she runs back and gets Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved, and they came back with her, looked into the empty tomb, and returned to their homes. But she stayed - she couldn't leave. She was rooted to that place in her grief.

And then, she bent again to look into the tomb and saw two angels, who asked her why she was weeping. She explained that someone had taken away the body of her Lord and she didn't know where they had laid Him. And then, she turned around and looked, and saw a man standing there. She thought he was the gardener, and she thought maybe he knew something. So when He asked her why she was weeping, she told Him the same thing she had told the angels, and then said to Him that if He had taken the Lord's body, to tell her where it was, so she could take care of Him.

To that, the man replied one word, her name. "Mary." And in that instant, that glorious instant, her eyes were opened, and she realized that it was Him - it was Jesus - and He was alive - and standing right there in front of her! He was alive! Alive! Her heart was bursting out of her chest.

In an instant, in the blink of an eye, everything had changed. Everything. Her tears of sorrow turned to tears of joy, her sadness was gone, her hopelessness

shattered, her soul, once so empty, now filled to the brim.

Evil had not won. Those horrible people hadn't had the last word. Death had not taken Jesus away. He was alive, right there in front of her!

When Jesus told her to go and tell others the Good News, she couldn't move fast enough, and from that day on, she would tell anyone who would listen about Her Savior, and His resurrection. And as she did, anyone who looked at her knew she was a changed person - she was a person who lived everyday with resurrection faith.

And so were the disciples. They went from hiding behind closed doors in fear and guilt, to going out and sharing the Gospel with fervor, creating a church despite all attempts to stop their work. They went from being afraid to being empowered. Easter changed them - there was nothing they could not do, nothing they could not face.

Mary Magdalene and the disciples were people of resurrection faith because of that first Easter, and friends, so are we. Because of the resurrection, because of Jesus' victory of the grave, we live with joy - not giddy happiness, but deep, inner joy, contentment, peace. Because of the resurrection, we know that the past is the past, our sins have been paid for by Jesus Himself, the future is filled with endless possibilities, and though we will surely endure sufferings, we will never endure them alone - because the risen Christ is with us, or as one writer put it, because of the resurrection, we know that God is with us "on both sides of the grave." We have nothing to ultimately fear, because He is with us always.

So this morning, I want to paint a picture for you of what it means to live with resurrection faith, by telling you about two people. The first is a person whose name some of you may recognize from a long time ago - her name is Joni Eareckson Tada. When Joni was a young woman, one day she went swimming with her sister, and jumped off of a raft into the water, and hit a rock on the bottom, and was instantly paralyzed from the neck down. Her life forever changed. She had been a wonderfully adventurous young woman, who loved to ride horses and hang out with her friends, and then, with her accident, everything came to a screeching halt, and she was plunged into depression. She even tried to get someone to help her take her own life.

Her journey up out of depression took a long time, and it began when someone said something that really had a deep impact on her. It was on a day when she was in a lot of pain, and suffering badly. A friend was sitting by her bedside, and trying desperately to help her out, and she said these words to her: "Joni, Jesus knows how you feel - you aren't the only one - why, He was paralyzed

too.” Joni said, “what do you mean?” And her friend said, “Remember when he was nailed to the cross, his back raw from beatings. He must have yearned for a way to move to change positions, or redistribute His weight. But He couldn’t. He was paralyzed by the nails.”

Something clicked inside Joni when she heard that. She knew in that moment that Jesus had been where she had been, and she knew where He had gone, and she knew that where He had gone, she would go too one day. She became a person of resurrection faith. Her whole outlook changed. Her physical condition didn’t, but her outlook did. She became a person of hope, and possibility, and joy - even in her paralyzed condition.

These are her words: “Okay, I am paralyzed. It’s terrible. I don’t like it. But can God still use me, paralyzed? Can I, paralyzed, still worship God and love Him? He has taught me that I can.

Maybe God’s gift to me is my dependence on Him. I will never reach the place where I am self-sufficient, where God is crowded out of my life. I’m aware of His grace to me every moment. My need for help is obvious every day when I wake up, flat on my back, waiting for someone to come dress me. I can’t even comb my hair or blow my nose alone!

But I have friends who care. I have the beauty of the scenery.

The peace that counts is an internal peace, and God has lavished me with that peace.

And there’s one more thing (she says), I have hope for the future. The Bible speaks of our bodies being ‘glorified’ in heaven. In high school that was always such a hazy, foreign concept. But now I realized that I will be healed. I haven’t been cheated out of being a complete person - I’m just going through a forty-year delay, and God is with me even through that. Being ‘glorified’ - I know the meaning of that now. It’s the time, after my death here, when I’ll be on my feet dancing.” (Philip Yancy, *Where is God When It Hurts?*, p. 119)

That’s resurrection faith, friends - being at peace, living with hope, knowing that God walks with her every step of the way, even in the midst of her struggle - that’s resurrection faith.

The other story is one that I learned from a book I just finished reading not long ago, entitled *Unbroken*, by a woman named Laura Hillenbrand. It is an incredible book, but not easy to read. Here’s why.

It’s the story of a man named Louie Zamperini, mostly about his experience in World War II. When he was growing up, Louie was a gifted runner, and when I

say gifted, I mean gifted. He was an Olympic runner, a record-setting runner, a very famous record-setting runner.

When the war broke out, Louie signed up to serve his country. He was an airman in the Army Air Force. One day, on a rescue mission to search for a plane that was missing, Louie's plane went down in the Pacific. Only three people survived the crash - Louie and two others - and they drifted at sea for months under terrible conditions. By the time they were rescued, only two of them had survived - and sadly, they were rescued by the Japanese, who immediately put them into a prison camp, with other prisoners of war.

Life for Louie was especially brutal in the camps in which he was imprisoned. Because he was famous in the states, he was a target for the captors. They were going to make an example of him - and so they beat him mercilessly for no cause whatsoever - beat him regularly and brutally - to the point of unconsciousness, broken bones, near death. One captor in particular, that the prisoners nicknamed "The Bird," was horrible to Louie - he would come into the barracks, look past all the other men, find Louie - and beat him to a pulp all the time.

After the war ended, and Louie came home, he had an incredibly hard time. He had flashbacks about the brutality, he couldn't sleep, he fought with everyone, including his wife, he became an alcoholic - he was in terrible shape. Finally, his wife decided to leave him. She was going to take their child and leave.

And then one day, the evangelist Billy Graham came to town with his revival. Louie wanted no parts of him - he was angry at God as well as the rest of the world. Despite his wife's pleading, he would not go to the revival. But she did, and when she came home that night, she told him she was not going to leave, but stay.

The next night, she begged Louie again to go with her, and finally, he relented and went, but when the altar call came, he hightailed it out of there. He wanted no part of that.

Then, the third night, she asked him to go again, and he said he would but that they would have to leave when Graham made the altar call. That night, during his sermon, Graham asked why God would let people suffer, and then he asked them all to look up at the stars and consider the grandeur of God, but also a love so intimate that He knew every hair on their heads.

When Graham said that, when he had the people look up into the starry sky, Louie had a flashback to a moment in that lifeboat. They were literally dying in that lifeboat, and Louie had looked up at the vast sky filled with stars, and he remembers having said to God, "If you save me, I will serve you forever." At the

same time Louie was remembering that, Billy Graham said this in his sermon, “God works miracles one after another. God says, ‘If you suffer, I’ll give you the grace to go forward.’”

And that did it. In that moment, for Louie Zamperini, everything changed. He became a man of resurrection faith. He turned on his heels, and instead of storming out of the stadium, he went down to the altar, and gave his life to Christ, and was forever changed. When he got home that night, he dumped all of his liquor down the sink, and went to bed, and when he woke up the next morning, he felt cleansed, new whole.

Well, his story doesn’t stop there. In 1950, Louie returned to Japan. For a long time, he had dreamed of going back there to murder “The Bird” - so deep was his anger and hatred. Now, he was going back to face his captors, and see if his new found faith and peace would prove to be resilient.

When he got there, he found out that “The Bird” had died. Listen to Laura Hillenbrand’s words about what happened next:

“The words (the Bird is dead) washed over Louie. In prison camp, Watanabe (that the “The Bird’s” real name), Watanabe had forced him to live in incomprehensible degradation and violence. Bereft of his dignity, Louie had come home to a life lost in darkness, and had dashed himself against the memory of the Bird. But on an October night in Los Angeles, Louie had found ‘daybreak.’ That night, the sense of shame and powerlessness that had driven his need to hate “The Bird” had vanished. “The Bird” was no longer his monster. He was only a man.”

She continues: “In Sugamo Prison, as he was told of Watanabe’s fate, all Louie saw was a lost person - a life now beyond redemption. He felt something that he had never felt for his captor before. With a shiver of amazement, he realized that it was compassion. At that moment, something shifted sweetly inside him. It was forgiveness, beautiful and effortless and complete. For Louie Zamperini, the war was over.” (Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken*, p. 379)

Louie, indeed, had become a man living with resurrection faith. There’s a picture in the book of Louie riding a skateboard when he was in his 90's, with a grin across his face to beat the band! He was a man at peace, he was a man of joy, he was a man changed by Easter.

That’s resurrection faith, my friends. That’s what Easter means. Life has changed. Death has been defeated. Evil doesn’t have the final word. Sin has been overcome. The past is the past, and the future is secure, and through it all, no matter what comes, God is with us. In Jesus Christ, He is with us always, on both sides of the grave.

So rejoice today, for Christ is risen! Tears of sorrow have been replaced by tears of joy! Let us go forth from this place as people filled with resurrection faith - filled with peace, filled with hope, filled with joy!

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Thanks be to God. Hallelujah!

Amen.