

What Feels Lost

A Sermon Expositing John 20:1-18

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I imagine that like most students Ed first attended, because it was convenient. Back then in the late 1930s and early 40s it was a bit more of a given than it is now that Christian college students would find and attend a church near their campus and you couldn't get much nearer than directly across the street. You couldn't get much lovelier than that old church either. The baptistry was built of marble chosen for its color which resembles those of the sunrise and a box for flowers ran behind it. The front edge was built to overflow into a trough when a baptismal candidate stepped into the water. In that beautiful old church you could quite literally see and smell and feel and hear the new morning of God's redemptive love trickling, overflowing. I'm quite sure the beauty of the building had *something* to do with Ed's choice to call that place his home during college, but I have to think the congregation had something to do with it too. He found in them a kind of family. Dear ones to dine with, to worship with, to serve alongside, to challenge him, and teach him.

They became so important to Ed that graduation came and went, but he didn't. He married the love of his life in that beautiful sanctuary and together they remained. In time Ed became as much a fixture there as that beautiful baptistry. He invested his resources and his efforts and his wisdom there and he was a valued and constant presence there. You could argue that Ed wasn't merely a part of the church, but that the church had become a part of Ed over the course of five and half decades.

You can imagine, then, how much it hurt when all of that was taken away. You see, the blessing and the struggle for all churches, but for Baptist churches in particular is that with a bottom-up kind of polity anyone's idea can make its way to the center of the life of the church. I'm sure that in his 50 something years there Ed had seen the church make some bad decisions, but usually you can just ride those out and wisdom brings about reform. On this occasion though the congregation was making a critical mistake. The moral teaching of the church would have no credibility, their partnerships with other congregations would be in jeopardy, and the congregation would be divided. Some who Ed had known and loved for years would leave the church and on that point Ed wasn't sure he wouldn't have to leave too. He didn't want to leave, but he could feel everything that was right and wonderful and good about his faith community slipping away. It felt, I'm sure like he was losing it all.

It felt like his long time church was being taken from him, because he didn't yet know what he would know on the other side of the story. In that sense, Ed was like those first disciples to arrive at the tomb of Jesus who didn't yet know it, but had just crossed over to this side, to our side of Easter. You see, you and I know what happens on this side of the story, so it's easy for us to just go right past that deep moment of loss. Just the evening before yesterday they had witnessed their greatest hope, their great love arrested, violently tortured and killed. It would be days or weeks before even the first shock of the trauma began to give way to a more full range of grieving emotions. In that already-broken state Mary Magdalene saw and reported the insult to their injury. The stone sealing the cleft in the rock to keep predators away from all that remained of her dearly beloved had been rolled away. Predators, at least, animal predators can't roll stones. She didn't even need to see

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

in the tomb to know what had happened. She ran immediately to the others and told them that Jesus's body had been stolen. The cruelty of such seared in her heart, but there was perhaps an even greater concern. Someone obviously in line with those who had worked to snuff out this life wasn't content with death. The humiliation and desecration continued beyond. They would stop at nothing to stomp out not only Jesus's life, but his teaching and the way of living. Mary and the others couldn't be sure that others wouldn't be following Jesus to the tomb. They couldn't be sure they wouldn't be following him in death. Jesus gave them a way to see the world, to see others in the world, and to be in the world, but that way wouldn't be accepted by those in power. It was all being taken from them – their teacher, their security, their way of life – all gone. They felt it was all being taken away, because they didn't know what we know because we're on this end of the story – that sometimes when it feels like we're losing something, sometimes when it feels like something is being taken away we're actually experiencing resurrection.

If we're willing to read back the story of our lives in the same way we've just read back the story of the resurrection – if we're willing to recall the moments of loss that have given way in the end to new life I think we might find that we are often convinced of the deadliness of what is really new life. --Please don't mishear me. There are losses in this world that are nothing more, just tragedy and it does not do us well to candy coat those moments.-- But there are too these other moments when the death set before us is really new life and they happen both in our individual lives and in the wider social world.

Like Ed, I once lost a congregation. Factions within identified me as the source of problems that had existed in the church for decades and they made my pastorate and life there untenable. I had invested everything and committed everything to that church such that I didn't know what would or could come next. So afraid was I that I started sending of messages to far off places like Rochester, New York. I'm preaching today from the other side of that story.

You may not always hear those stories all the way through as some are necessarily private. If fortune ever has or ever does smile on you enough to be in close relationship with someone who has battled addiction you will know that the resurrection in that story almost always follows a moment when it seems that a substance has stolen everything. If you or someone you love has ever had to escape a toxic relationship you'll know that the things one must endure and the things one must do to get to new life sure seem deadly at the time. Those who have harbored a secret about who they are and have lived a kind of half-life in the darkness of the proverbial closet might tell you that there was a time when they realized their life was limited by not being fully known, but that the prospect of coming out seemed like it would cost them everything until, for some, for many, resurrection came in the form of being able to live fully.

Yes, it happens in our individual lives, but we are being asked, I believe, to realize that in our social lives, our lives as citizens of the world that there too we will sometimes feel something is being taken from us when really new life is trying to break forth. Just think of how a single word can suck the oxygen out of a room, "reparations." And why does it feel so uncomfortable to say a thing like that, especially on a festive day like this? Because it introduces the prospect to some, to many I'm afraid that what they have may be taken away. You see, things really do *feel* that way sometimes, but the prospect of a society working together to not only bring an end to the systemic failures that are still with us, but to also set aright those who've struggled under generational disenfranchisement is the prospect of better, richer world for *all* of us. So too in each area of equity that is so clearly before us in our time are there those who will experience any change as personal loss, but only because we're not holding out hope for resurrection on the other side of the story.

The truth is these stories rarely develop in ways that are either purely social or purely individual. Resurrection, you see, is for each of us and for all of us.

Hans and David had been a part of their church for, I don't know, a little while, but certainly not five and a half decades like Ed. Don't you just hate it when people who haven't been around as long as you have start trying to change everything!?! Kinda feels like someone's prying what's yours right out of your hands. See, David and Hans were, let's say married. The state of Texas had not yet had their right to ignore the marriages of same sex couples taken away, but David and Hans had married without state sanction years prior. The problem

for Ed and for others within their church really came to a head when it was decided that Hans, dedicated Christian, servant among servants, compassionate and caring heart would be ordained a deacon. Ed begrudged no one their way of life, but he didn't want to be forced to give tacit approval of something he felt was immoral either. As the conversation shaped up in the way you, FBC, and a number of other churches have come to understand well, it became clear that most, but not all of the congregation wanted to affirm Hans's Christian ministry through ordination and thereby affirm his and David's marriage and full personhood. That was, as we've said, a great blow to Ed. Despite his insistence that doing so was not only wrong, but could mean ruin for the church he loved so dearly the congregation seemed to be moving forward anyway. When the morning of the ordination came Ed was there for the Sunday School hour early, but before the service began he passed a note to the pastor, "I cannot in good conscience participate in the ordination of a practicing homosexual," and he left feeling, one would assume, robbed of what had been his home for over fifty years.

One can't let go of their home of all those years quite that easily though, so Ed stuck around as a participant in the congregation, but a voice of dissent on the path they had chosen to be a Welcoming and Affirming congregation. Thank God he did. That's what allowed him and the rest of his congregation to see what was on the other side of the story. He couldn't deny that Hans and David were there and were for real. Their faith was authentic and their love for their faith community was as real as Ed's. Whenever someone suffered loss, Hans along with his fellow deacons responded with tender care and provision. When the high points of worship arrived, the Easters and Christmases and the weddings and funerals Hans, David and Ed were all there together with their church. For that matter they were all there in all the lower, more mundane Sunday to Sunday moments of worship too. And the fellowship and the kids graduations and the fund raisers and the passing out water bottles on the sidewalk to new students at Ed's alma mater that brought him to that church all those years ago.

It took a few years, but on one of those regular Sundays, one of those ho hum days of resurrection, Larry, the pastor and a dear friend and mentor of mine glanced in the direction of Hans and David's pew (yes, all churches have designated seating) and he saw Ed approaching them. He saw as Ed took one of their hands in his left and one in his right, looked them in the eyes, and said, "I want to thank you. I was wrong and you showed me that by the way that you live and the way that you serve. Thank you for your example and for being patient and loving with me."

I have no idea what they sang or what was preached in service that day back in the 90s, but I know that whatever it was they proclaimed that Christ is Risen and they raised their Alleluias, because they made it through to see what happened on the other side of the story.

On this great day of celebration when we cross once more from death into life let us take stock of what may be happening right now in our lives and in our world that may feel like personal loss, but may actually be the beginning of new life for us all.

Amen.