

Luke 24:1-12

"Good News from the Graveyard"

I have never been one who needed to visit graves. My grandparents are buried on the family farm in Gaffney and I could easily go there to see them, but in my mind they are not there. They are in my heart and in my memories, but not in the graves. However, two things happened just last week that may have changed my thinking about the good news that can be found in the graveyard.

The first is this: My mother-in-law's ashes are in the columbarium at our home church, John Knox. Our son was married there last weekend and my husband, the best man, told me that Carter got really antsy when he realized that the picture taking was over and he still had about a 45 minute wait! He told his dad not to worry but that he needed to get out of there and would be back. Danny said that when he returned, very composed, after about 15 minutes, he asked him where he had gone, and he replied, "I just went down to visit Grandma."

That was the first thing that changed my mind. You see my son's wisdom in knowing where to go to receive the peace that passes all understanding gave me a new perspective on graveyards. Carter knew in his mind that his Grandma was is not in that little drawer. But his HEART knew that he would still find a connection as he stood in front of the name of a beloved. This is Good News!

The other thing that changed my mind was a very strong urge that I felt last week to walk through the historic graveyard here at our church. It has been right outside my window all this time but I have never been tempted. So when I started thinking about this morning's Easter message and felt literally compelled to take pen and pad and stroll among the graves, I can only assume it was the Holy Spirit that led me.

It was a beautiful, breezy, sunny day. I headed toward a large stone with the name GASTON on it. That is the last name of the man I call my pastor and it seemed like a logical place to begin, being a novice graveyard walker. One grave immediately caught my eye. "Pearl – son of A.C. and G.A. Gaston. May 2, 1914. May 26, 1917." Just over three years old! I wondered what those three years were filled with and how those parents must have felt to know that their son had to squeeze all of life into such a short amount of time.

Of course, there are many soldiers buried there from many different branches of service and many different wars. Andrew Charles Moore is just one soldier that I took note of - killed on the Plains of Manassas, VA at the age of 24 in 1868. Under his dates the words inscribed read: "The Best of Motives is our Country's Good". As with all of our soldiers, he made such a willing sacrifice so that I could live free from so many different kinds of persecution today.

But the thing that stood out to me the most as I wandered around other peoples' pasts was the consistent hope that I felt there. Even when I came across one family with three little markers in a row that didn't even live long enough to get names, I was overwhelmed by the promise that filled my heart. I guess this was summed up best by a stone that posed the question, "Death is Eternal Life, Why Should We Weep?"

This is basically the question that the two men asked the women who went to anoint Jesus' body on that first Easter Sunday. All four Gospel accounts tell us that Jesus was buried in a borrowed tomb. It belonged to a rich man named Joseph of Arimathea. He was a prominent figure in local society because besides being rich, he was also a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling religious body.

When they took down the body of Jesus from the cross, his body was in bad shape. It bore all the marks of the abuse he had suffered. He was covered with blood. There was a hole in

his side. His face was horribly disfigured. The skin hung from his back in tatters. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, another religious leader who was a secret disciple as well, wrapped the body in strips of linen cloth and carried his body to a tomb. It is hard for us to imagine today, being certain as we are of the Lordship of Christ that all that was provided for him was a tomb meant for someone else.

Mary and the other women followed closely behind, weeping, as we often do at newly covered graves. They knew that Jesus had to be buried before sundown to fulfill the Jewish Law. The graveyard they came to was probably much like ours. A certain cemetery outside Jerusalem. Not as large perhaps, but quiet and peaceful. It was a garden cemetery ... a little collection of tombs dug out of solid rock. There the Jews buried their sacred dead. There they laid their loved ones waiting for a better day, just as we do.

Yet "early on the first day of the week" as Luke tells us, the women returned to give more love and attention to the man who had changed their lives so. They wanted to anoint him properly. He deserved more than the hasty burial that he had received. Mary and the others certainly did not expect to find an empty tomb and when they realized that the heavy stone had somehow been rolled away and their Jesus was missing, they faced another wave of sadness and despair.

They did, however, find two men, angels we now know, who asked them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" And Luke's Easter story, which I am sure I have read at least a hundred times, took on new meaning as my mind's eye saw the stone just outside this sanctuary in Moore, South Carolina that says simply, "Death is Eternal Life, Why Should we Weep?" And I finally understood yet another reason why people need to visit the graves of their loved ones.

You see, every other time I had walked among the graves, my heart only held on to the question that the angels posed to the women but completely ignored the declaration of faith that followed. I had not heard the Good News from the Graveyard!

I suppose my hesitance to visit the graves of those I love must have come from the thought that, while I was there, I was only looking back. And while looking back, remembering the life of one that we love, **is** important to all of us, it is **NOT** the end of our faith. And the Easter story came alive for me in a different way when I realized that walking through the graveyard is also about looking forward. And that while I was there, even the markers of small children and soldiers who had sacrificed everything cried out with the hopeful proclamation that the angels shared, **HE IS NOT HERE, BUT HAS RISEN!**

The pervasive hope that I felt as I walked among the dead was the sure and certain knowledge that because Jesus has risen, every graveyard bears the Good News that the dead in Christ rise too! You see, it was God's grace that Mary and the other women experienced at the tomb. It was a grace that they could not grasp at the time. But today we know that this is a picture of the grace that God offers us and that allows US to proclaim, that even death will not separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

What Good New that is. And friends, it is the Good News that we celebrate every Sunday – not just on Easter! Because ours is truly a religion of hope. And it is HOPE that helps us when we see tragedy on the news. It is hope that surrounds us when we deal personally with death and loss and grief. And so when we take the time to remember the past, we find the truths that we need to fuel our hope and help us look forward.

So even though she didn't really know it when she went to anoint the body of her Lord,  
Mary found Good News in the Graveyard. And friends, we can too. Death is Eternal Life, Why  
do you weep? Jesus Christ is risen. He is risen indeed! Amen.