

Ruth 1:1-18

“When I Get Where I’m Going”

Last week my parents got new neighbors and my mother went over to greet them. It turns out that they are members of mom and dad’s church, but the church is so large they have never met. As they were getting more acquainted, my mother worked it into the conversation that her daughter is a Presbyterian minister. When they asked in what church and she said Nazareth in Moore, SC, the gentlemen said, “My whole family is buried in the cemetery.”

I cannot tell you how often that happens to me! It seems that people all over the Southeast have someone in our cemetery. As I thought about this it reminded me that, until becoming the pastor here, I had never been one for visiting graves.

I remember as a young child, when we would make our annual pilgrimage to the beautiful Shenandoah Valley of Virginia to visit my mother’s family, that we HAD to include a trip to the cemetery. At the age of 8 or so, I was always mystified as to how it could be so meaningful for people to stand around and look at a bunch of stones with names on them.

“Maurice Newton” one read. I figured this must be Uncle Maury, the town doctor that I never met and only know through stories. For example, Maury must have prayed very long prayers because to this day, whenever anyone prays too long in our family, as soon as he or she finally utters their “Amen”, the whole family responds in unison with “Uncle Maury!” There was one that read, “Mae Wheeler Gearheart”. This was my great-grandmother, who I only remember from pictures. She was evidently the only

other short person, besides me, in my whole family because whenever people would meet me in those Virginia mountains, they would exclaim, “You are so tiny, just like Miss Mae.”

The one that troubled me the most simply read “Baby Girl Newton”. When I saw this grave, it was the first time I ever knew that my Aunt Lucille had a baby that had died. I wasn’t bothered so much by the size of the tiny tombstone as I was by the thought that someone did not even live long enough to get a name. It just seemed so sad.

Somehow, though, I understood even as a child, that my mother needed to go to the cemetery because she KNEW the people in the graves. Uncle Maury had delivered her in the big bed upstairs. Granny Mae was her Grandmother, the one who convinced her to go down the aisle in church at the age of 8 and get “dunked” while her parents were away, much to their chagrin. They were Disciples of Christ who only believed in sprinkling after all, and this had been done to Mom when she was an infant. And I’m sure she often wondered what kind of woman Baby Girl Newton would have been and if they would have been like sisters.

But it is just not something I have ever needed and as soon as I was old enough to be left alone, I begged off of cemetery duty. Now please don’t misunderstand me. I am certainly NOT being critical of those who find meaning in standing at the graves of loved ones. It is a way of looking back. And looking back is actually one of the cornerstones of our faith. And this weekend, it is particularly important as we celebrate Memorial Day, that we look back on those whose sacrifice have provided the freedom that allows us to worship here today.

Of course, in many ways, every Sunday when we worship, we are looking back – remembering our stories through our heritage in Scripture and recalling the promises of God and how they have been fulfilled. So today we are doubly nostalgic, as we remember those brave men and women whose graves are marked by flags as well as those who have given us our religious heritage.

Although I have never served in the military and neither has my father, husband or brother, I get a huge lump in my throat when folks rise at the appropriate song to remind me of what *they* have been through for me! I wasn't always so patriotic but when you marry into the Schaaf family it is pretty much expected. And also, living through the horrors of September 11, 2001 changed my views completely about what it means to be an American.

And since I served the first 15 years of my career as a pastor in a retirement community and have officiated at my share of funerals, I have gained a deeper appreciation of how looking back comforts us when someone we love joins the church triumphant. Perhaps my learning to understand how meaningful it can be to remember simply comes with age.

But the truth is that ANYONE can look back. Anyone can stand at a grave and remember a loved one. In fact, even those who have different faiths or no faith at all can look back at the life of the one they loved. At the heritage that made them who they are. At the memories that are a part of their stories. Yes, ANYONE CAN LOOK BACK.

But friends, only a Christian can look forward. Not only do we have the blessings of remembering where we HAVE been, but we can also look forward to where we are going. This is the thought that helps keep me grounded every time I hear about another

shooting in a school or a mall or some other unexpected place. When a family member who is living with such a tragedy is interviewed and they speak of their faith being the rock that they are leaning on, it changes MY prayers. And this is what helps us all when we face the death of someone we love.

And even though I feel very strongly about honoring the freedom that we all have to choose other faiths and try to be a witness for Christ without saying or doing anything to put down another religion, I feel a great sense of relief when I hear people talk about the Christianity of one who has died in such circumstances. Because, as I said, only we Christians have the hope of looking forward.

The story of Ruth and Naomi is one of the most beautiful stories of faith in the Bible and seemed very appropriate for today because it is a story of looking forward and going home. It is the story of turning toward God for the restoration of hope and the faith to see beyond today, while honoring the faith that brought us to this point in our journey.

Ruth is the daughter-in-law of Naomi, a Hebrew who came to Moab with her husband and sons during a famine in Bethlehem, looking for food. While they were living among the Moabites, both sons married local women. Sadly enough, all the men folk in the family died while they are there, and Naomi is left with only two foreign daughters by marriage.

Now, three widows in Biblical times with no man to care for them was truly a tragedy! Seeing no future for a refugee widow without support in a foreign land, Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem and packed up her things to leave. But to her surprise, when she went down to catch the local camel train to Judea, her daughters-in-law were waiting for her with their bags packed too!

“Where are you going?” she asked. “With you,” they replied. “No way” said Naomi “there is no future for you in Bethlehem. Stay here with your own people and find good husbands and settle down.” After many tears, one daughter-in-law, Orpah, decided to stay. But Ruth would not be budged. And so she uttered this pledge, once very popular as a choice to be read as part of the marriage ceremony.

In the King James English, we read that she stood firm. “Entreat me not to leave thee. For whither thou goest, I will go and where thou lodgest, I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people and thy God my God. Where thou diest, I will die and there I will be buried. The LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.”

These words were more than just words of loyalty. It is one thing to pledge yourself to another person, but to pledge yourself to *that person's God* is truly an act of faith. It is also an example of the Hebrew word for love, *hesed*, which describes a love that will never be broken. And because she was dedicated to this pledge, Ruth went on to become the great-grandmother of King David and a direct descendant of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is a beautiful twist of God's providence that she uttered her allegiance even in death. It is also a foreshadowing of the grace that God offers us and of the love that allows US to proclaim, that even death will not separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

So, every Sunday when we worship, we are taking time to remember, to look back at our heroes in the faith. But for Christians, every Sunday is also about looking forward. 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. I guess what I am saying is, that when we remember our past, we find the truths that we need to fuel our hope and help us look forward.

Of course, we have a different kind of hope today than the hope that Naomi and Ruth held as worshipers of the one true God, Yahweh. God had called the Hebrews to be God's people through their spiritual father, Abraham. He had promised to be their God and to be with them, empowering each of the children he called with the gifts that were needed to perpetuate the people Israel. They were looking forward to a coming Messiah.

Yet as much as God loved the people, they continued to sin and live in ways that were disobedient to the covenant. And so do we. Our real hope came when God sent his son to be the final sacrifice as an offering for our sins. This is the hope that has given many a soldier the courage to go into battle, many a hero the bravery to stand up to injustice and it is THAT hope that encourages us with the every-day trials we face. Our sins are washed by the blood of our savior, covering us with a new covenant and a new hope.

So, as we look back and give thanks for those American heroes who have given us the freedom to speak our truth, to love who we love, to worship who we worship, to vote in the ways that we choose and countless other privileges we are given by their sacrifice, Ruth is the perfect person for us to center our thoughts on.

As a foreigner and a woman, Ruth had two strikes against her. Yet she is one of five women who are listed in the genealogy of Jesus Christ found in the Gospel of Matthew. How can that be? Because the very things that OUR country stands for, things that our soldiers have fought for, are given to us by the grace of a God whose picture of salvation is much larger than we can ever truly understand.

What hope, in looking back at Ruth, we are given that God can and will call into his kingdom those that we might deem unsuitable. God teaches us through her story that God looks beyond the barriers that we use to define acceptability. Naomi and Ruth's story is a reminder that, if each of us here were given what we deserve, we would have no present or future to cling to.

So, let us look back and remember those in our Biblical heritage and in our American heritage who have paved the way for us to be the body of Christ at Nazareth. Let us look back at the promises made to us by the God of love and grace. But let us also look forward with hope to the promises that will be fulfilled in the days to come. May hope be ours when choices seem agonizing and life is uncertain. And may God use each of us here to share that hope with those who really need it.

As I thought about this hope, a title from an old Brad Paisley song kept running through my mind so I borrowed it for the sermon title. He sings, "When I get where I'm going, there'll be only happy tears. I will shed the sins and struggles I have carried all these years. And I'll leave my heart wide open. I will love and have no fear. Yeah when I get where I'm going, don't cry for me down here.

So much pain and so much darkness, in this word we stumble through. All these questions I can't answer, so much work to do. But when I get where I'm going, and I see my Maker's face, I will stand forever in the light of His amazing grace. Yeah, when I get where I'm going, there'll be only happy tears. Hallelujah! I will love and have no fear!"

Today, we affirm the hope that God has offered us in the life, death and resurrection of his only Son. So, let us be reminded that when we get where WE'RE

going, that we too will stand in the light of God's amazing grace and hope will be our forever. Amen.

Lord of the nations, on this day when we remember the struggles through which our country has gone in its efforts to preserve our liberties, we thank you for having made our country great and our people free. Above all do we thank you for the blessings of religious liberty to preach your Word without hindrance and to worship you without fear of persecution. We pray for those who have served and who are serving in the military to protect our country and try to make the world a safer place.

We ask that you hold your gracious, protecting hand over us and over all the people of our country. Guide those in authority and grant them wisdom as they rule so that peace and prosperity may be ours according, to your will.

As a community of faith, we pray most of all that your Gospel, which alone can make men and women truly free, may be preached in all its truth and purity throughout the world.

Help us to use this freedom to the fullest extent, so that by our words and our actions, we will encourage those who live in fear and persecution; that we may comfort those who grieve; that we may support those who are living through illness of mind, body or spirit; that we may seek to understand and be instruments of healing and unity. As you have commanded, we pray for our enemies and those who persecute us, knowing that love is the best agent of healing that we can offer.

Heavenly Father, we don't understand all that is going on in the world today, so we turn to you in prayer and put our trust in you to guide us through our difficult days.

Bless the church in the world and in this place and make it clear to us how we are to serve you and each other. Bring to us and to your children all throughout the world that peace which passes all understanding, and which is to be found in the knowledge that Jesus loves us and has redeemed us from all our sin. We ask it in His name. Amen