

MESSAGE: “*The Absent Becomes Present*”

Text: John 20:1-18

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to awaken life by releasing the tangle of grief that tethers loss.

“When does it get better?” Tommy asked, as I took a sip of iced coffee. This was not the first time the question had been asked. We had spoken by text message, email and phone. The last of which alarmed me enough to set up a time to meet in person at the Starbucks on the state line. Tommy’s wife, Lily, had died three months previous.

They met at a twelve-step recovery program, fell in love at first sight and glued their hearts together in search of freedom from their respective addictions. Their first real date was an Easter service at the church where I was pastor and Tommy was a songleader/guitarist with the instinct of a Paul McCartney. Lily was Catholic, so they married at her church. She was the ‘catch-of-a-lifetime,’ and Tommy adored her. But one day he came home from work and found that she had relapsed. One hit of the drug was all it took, and she was gone, just eight months into the marriage.

“When does it get better?” I wanted to say, “Tomorrow will be better than today.” I wanted to say, “It does get better.” I wanted to say, “Moments of relief will eventually become moments of grief, with room to smile and laugh.” But I knew that none of these would help much in the moment. I thought of the prose-verse that I sometimes use in funerals: “Grief has its rhythm—first, the wild swift tide of despair; the time of bleak aloneness when even God seems not there. And then, the slow receding—till quiet calms the sea, and bare, unwashed sand everywhere where castles used to be. The gentle lapping of the waves upon the shore—and then, the pearl-lined shells of memories to help us smile again.” I thought of it, but I did not say it.

I thought of recent visits with my father-in-law, who, because of his dementia, would ask, “Where is your mother?”

“She’s not with us, Dad”

“Did she die?”

“Yes, Dad she did,” as I felt him grieve yet again as if for the first time, like a Groundhog Day of perpetual mourning.

“When will it get better?” I looked Tommy in the eye and said, “Lily’s not coming back—one day you may be able to accept that—but that day isn’t today. Lily is with God and God is with you—maybe that’s the best we can do for today.”

Much of the sting that injures the grieving heart is precisely this: a profound and unrelenting absence. The person I love, trust and rely upon is present one moment and absent the next. I cannot bring her or him back; therefore, I grieve. The disciples and followers of Jesus grieved in this way, too. One day the Master told stories of shepherds and sheep, and the next he was gone. One night he shared with them a Passover meal; the next he spent as the occupant of Joseph's garden tomb. Absence through death is surely among the most difficult things to be endured.

Sometimes the loss we feel is compounded by other circumstances. The survivor, for example, who loses her home, because she depended on her husband's income. The partner who goes to a nursing home, because the spouse is no longer around to provide care. Or perhaps the loss of celebration when a loved one dies just before Christmas, a child's wedding or a golden anniversary. The grief of Charlie Chaplin's widow was assaulted when his body was stolen from its grave and held for ransom. Surely nothing is sacred, if in death the body is not allowed to rest in peace. That is how Mary Magdalene must have felt when she first learned that Jesus' body was missing from the tomb.

Read John 20:1-18 (congregation as Mary).

John 20 sets the foundation for Easter faith upon two great facts which we may call the "Great Absence" and the "Great Presence." (pause) The chapter opens with a poignant scene: Mary goes to Jesus' tomb to do her grief work. The traumatic memory of Jesus' execution and the desperate loss she feels overwhelm her. When she arrives, she is confronted with a mystery. The stone has been rolled away, and Jesus' body is absent. (pause) She had expected it to be present. She had expected it to be available for calling hours, but it is not. You can have a funeral without a pastor, but can you have one without the deceased?

What can this mean? Has Joseph moved the body of Jesus? Have temple authorities or Roman soldiers taken it? Did the disciples remove it? Grief is side-stepped for a moment by many jogging questions. Mary immediately reports this new 'absence' to Peter who, with John, runs to check it out. They emerge from the tomb just as baffled. But now a new possibility flutters at the edge of their imagination. It can't be...can it? Can it possibly be that the worker of miracles has himself become a miracle? They dare not hope for such a thing.

Like Mary, Peter and John, the declaration of the "Great Absence" gives wing to our imagination, too. Can it be that death is not the period to end life's sentence? Is God able to raise the dead? Is there hope beyond the grave? Will I see my loved one again? Will I too be raised after I die? God takes our question marks, straightens them out, and returns

them as exclamation points! Do you recall the words of the angel recorded by Luke in his version of the Easter story? “Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here. He is risen!”

When we celebrated my mother’s 50th birthday, some friends of hers painted a sign 5’ high by 8’ long and posted it outside their home on busy Route 125. They also conveniently placed an ad on the obituary page of the local newspaper. Both sign and ad read: “Fran Bascom...we mourn the passing of your youth, 1932 to 1982.”

In the days that followed, my Mom received several phone calls from unsuspecting callers who wished to express condolences to my father. You can imagine how surprised they were to hear my Mom’s voice on the other end of the line! The absence they felt contradicted the presence they encountered, and so it was with Mary.

Confused and troubled, she stood weeping outside the tomb. She didn’t know what to think. Her confusion over Jesus’ absence clouded her experience of his presence. “Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?” a voice asked. Supposing him to be the gardener, Mary replied, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

In two simple words, the gospel writer describes Mary’s awakening to the Easter miracle. Jesus said simply, “Mary!” And she replied, “Rabboni!” which means teacher. Our Bible punctuates these one-word sentences with exclamation points, because they are amplified to every nation, race and generation. In this encounter, the promises of God become the realities of faith. Life outprints death. Absence is defeated by presence. The tomb becomes the womb as life is born again.

Easter is a game-changer! (pause) The ‘It is finished’ becomes a ‘Surely I will be with you always to the very end of time.’ It turns our questions into affirmations, our despair into hope, our weakness into strength, our doubt into true belief, and our mourning into dancing. Jesus is the firstfruit of resurrection, but scripture is clear that he is not raised alone. In his first letter to the Church of Corinth, the Apostle Paul describes it this way: “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.”

I’ll never forget the beautiful way my 3-year-old son reminded me of this truth. I had just finished the prayer of committal as my uncle placed the hand-crafted Maple box that held my grandfather’s cremains into the earth. I had held back the tears as long as I could, and they began to flow. Stephen, Jr.--Eric as we called him then, named after the

grandfather we were burying--took my hand, and with his singular smile said, "But Daddy, he will be alive again!" And Easter flooded my soul.

Do you feel an absence in your life? Are you grieving the loss of something or someone? Are you finding it hard to let go of that emotional tangle? Do you find yourself asking, "When does it get better?" If you listen, you, too, can hear the words of the Easter angel, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here. He has risen!"

**"Soar we now where Christ has led, Alleluia! Following our exalted head, Alleluia! Made like him, like him we rise, Alleluia! Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, Alleluia!"
Amen.**