

“They Shall Not Hurt or Destroy”

Luke 24:1-12; Isaiah 65:17-25

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Resurrection of the Lord (Easter Sunday)

A funny thing happened this week while I was reading the Bible. Except ... it wasn't so funny.

I was reading in the book of Lamentations. That's a book I don't read very often, but it showed up this year in the daily readings for Holy Week. The book contains many verses like this: “How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! ... She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks ... Enemies have stretched out their hands over all her precious things ... All her people groan as they search for bread ... my eyes flow with tears ... my children are desolate, for the enemy has prevailed....” Those passages refer to the devastation that the Babylonians brought upon the city of Jerusalem in the 6th century BC. But I was reading those words, my mind leaped to another time and another place. I wasn't thinking about Jerusalem. I was thinking about ... Mariupol. About ... Kharkiv. About ... Bucha.

Over the course of the past 50 days, I have heard more expressions of concern and sympathy for the people of Ukraine than I can ever recall hearing for the victims of any other war-torn country. I go to prayer meetings, and people lift up prayers for the people of Ukraine. I go to the Board of Deacons meetings, and I hear person after person lift up the situation in Ukraine as a matter of great concern. Hrant, our pianist, played a tribute to the city of Kyiv on the eve of the invasion. Some people are wearing the blue and yellow colors of the Ukrainian flag on their clothing; some houses around town are displaying a Ukrainian flag. There are plenty of countries where people are suffering – Afghanistan, to name just one – but there's something about what's going on in Ukraine that has really hit home.

By my count, the invasion of Ukraine is at least the *fourth* major crisis we have collectively experienced in the past two years. There was the pandemic, of course, and all the fear and disruption and contention that caused, and *continues* to cause. The last time there was a pandemic like this was more than a century ago. There were the racial justice protests that erupted in the summer of 2020, the likes of which we haven't seen since the 1960s; and the racial reckoning that followed. There was the 2020 presidential election and its aftermath, and *all* of its unprecedented drama, including the violence and the threats of violence. However you may personally feel about anything I just mentioned, I think we can agree that the issues surrounding the pandemic and the protests and the election have created *massive* tension in our country, and we are going to be dealing with all the ripple effects for *many* years to come. Add Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with a reshaping of the global economy, fears that the war might escalate, and the very real threat of a global food shortage due to the disruption of grain exports ... that makes four *major* crises – in the space of just *two* years. All of that has happened since we last gathered here in this sanctuary to celebrate Easter. Then consider the supply shortages, and the

massive inflation, the likes of which we haven't seen since the early 80's, and the massive numbers of books being banned, and the recent dramatic changes to in Supreme Court ... *wow*. A *lot* has happened in two years ... a whole lot of *tension* ... since we last gathered in this sanctuary to celebrate Easter.

I know a number of families in which the tension is *personal*. Families where the members *want* to love each other, yet who can barely stand to be in the same room with each other, because of *intense* disagreement within the household. Some of you have told me about the tension in *your* family.

What I'm getting at is that we have been experiencing a *massive amount of trauma* in a short amount of time. Mental health has emerged as a matter of great concern, for both children and adults. There are long waiting lists at many counseling practices. Just this week, a national panel of health experts said that all children 8 years and older should be screened for anxiety, and children 12 and older should be screened for depression. The trauma that many people are experiencing is *very, very real*.

It occurred to me, as I was reflecting on all this trauma, that *Christianity itself was birthed in trauma*. Our whole faith centers around an incredibly traumatic event, and its aftermath: the betrayal, beating, and public execution of Jesus Christ ... and his resurrection from the dead three days later.

Imagine for a moment how those eleven other apostles must have felt when they realized that *one of their own* had betrayed Jesus. That someone they had spent *so much time with* over nearly three years – someone who had spent so many days sitting and listening to Jesus, as they had – someone who had been entrusted with both leadership and financial responsibility – could have done such a thing.

Imagine how Peter felt, when he realized he had lied about his association with Jesus not once, not twice, but *three times*. Imagine how the other ten apostles felt, when they reflected on the fact that they had *abandoned* Jesus in his critical hour. Imagine how all the other disciples felt when they saw Jesus, beaten and bloody, carrying his cross through the streets of Jerusalem; when they *witnessed* the nails impaled into his hands and feet, his clothing stripped off him and divided among the soldiers; when they heard him take his last breath. When the light of the world went out. When their hope *died*. "We had hoped," one of them said a few days later, "that *he* was the one to redeem Israel."

Imagine the anguish of Joseph of Arimathea, who took the body of Jesus down and tenderly buried it, with myrrh and spices, 100 pounds' worth. That's a *lot* of ointment! That's a lot of grief.

Imagine how empty those women were feeling, a couple days later, as they gathered spices to take to the tomb, that Sunday morning. Imagine ... and *feel* ... their grief ... their loss ... their pain.

But here's the thing ... sometimes God does things to *overcome* our trauma. To *nullify* it.

The women arrived at the tomb, and what did they find? Not the body of Jesus, as they had expected. Something else. Something *wonderful*. A new birth of hope. The ultimate triumph of *God*.

Imagine how confused and conflicted they must have felt then. As some of them *saw* Jesus, not dead, but fully *alive*. As they started to spread the word to the other disciples, many of whom were incredulous, simply unable or unwilling to believe the truth of the women's words. How do you tell someone who is mourning the loss of someone they loved and admired – someone whose body they had seen *very, very dead!* – that their loved one really isn't dead after all? How do you tell someone who is deeply grieving that they don't need to grieve, that what they thought was true hadn't really been true after all? Or, rather, that it *had* been true, but it wasn't true *any more*? Those would not

have been easy conversations to have. Some of the disciples, like Thomas, weren't going to believe until they had seen the evidence with their very own eyes, *touched the wounds* with their very own hands.

Christianity was born in the midst of trauma, in a mass of confusing and conflicting emotions. Sometimes we forget that. Sometimes we fail to consider just how *hard* those days must have been. And sometimes we think that once Jesus was raised from the dead, everything after that was *just fine*.

But that's not how it happened. There were real-world realities those early Christians had to deal with. First, Jesus didn't stick around. Forty days later, he left them again, this time ascending into the heavenly realm, leaving them to organize and lead the church without his bodily presence. Then there were conflicts with the Jewish authorities, tensions within the church itself about how to take care of their members who were in need, and stress caused by church members who weren't being faithful to Jesus. Then came the persecutions, and the deaths. The execution of Stephen, one of the first Deacons. The execution of James, the son of Zebedee. Over the course of four decades, many leaders of the church were picked off, executed, one by one by one. Trauma ... after trauma ... after trauma.

Just because Jesus has been raised from the dead doesn't mean that all the problems of the world automatically go away. They certainly didn't go away for the early Christians. It was not a rosy, peaceful existence for them. There was a *lot* of pain and anguish, months and even *years* after Christ's resurrection. So we should have no reason to expect that *our* lives will be free of pain and suffering either. Just because we are Christians, just because we place our faith and trust in Jesus, doesn't mean that all the problems of the world just ... go away. That's not the message of the Gospel; that's not how the Gospel works. The Gospel is about *Christ's presence with us*, even in the midst of pain and anguish. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, because thou art with me" – remember those familiar words? God doesn't promise that we won't have to go through the valley of the shadow of death. God *does* promise that our Lord will be present with us when we do.

The people of Ukraine are suffering. Many people in *our* country are suffering. Many people in *other* countries are suffering. I can't wave a magic wand and make all that go away. No one can.

But what I *can* tell you is that there is a *hope* that comes through our faith in Jesus. A hope that means no matter how bad things feel right now – now matter how *awful* things seem to be sometimes, when we pay attention to what's *really going on* in the world – there is a *future* that is coming, a future that will *indeed* come, a future that *God* will bring about. God took the trauma of Good Friday and brought *joy* on Easter morn. In the same way, God will – one day – take all the traumas of this present world and bring *joy* in the city of God. There are *many* scripture passages that point to that future. One of them is a prophecy from the book of Isaiah: "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth... The wolf and the lamb shall feed together.... They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain."

I can't make that come about. I don't have that kind of power. I don't think any of us do.

But *God* has that power. God *will* make it happen. That's the promise of the Gospel, a promise we hold on to, sometimes for dear life, especially when things feel so incredibly bad. *God can – and God will – make all things new*. The wolf and the lamb *will* feed together. They shall *not* hurt or destroy.

God *will* bring *peace* to this troubled world. That's a *promise*. For Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed!) Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed!) Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed!) Alleluia! Amen.

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