

After the Storm

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
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Luke 24:1-12

A group of women had followed Jesus from Galilee. They had watched him die. They had watched Joseph of Arimathea give the body a hasty burial. They had prepared perfumed ointments for a proper burial. And then they had waited throughout a long Sabbath day.

Early in the morning on the first day of the week, they came to the grave, bringing the ointments they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the grave. And when they went inside, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. They were at a loss because of this, when, all of a sudden, two men in radiant clothing stood by them. The women bowed their faces to the ground in fear. The men said to them, “Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He’s not here. He was raised. Remember how he told you when he was still in Galilee that the Son of Man must be betrayed into the hands of sinful people and be crucified and rise on the third day?” And they remembered his words.

When they returned from the grave, they reported all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Jacob’s mother Mary, and the rest of the women with them — they told these things to the apostles. But these words seemed like nonsense to [the apostles], and they didn’t believe the women. But Peter got up and ran to the grave. And when he bent down to look, he saw only the burial clothes. Then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Children’s Story

The Great Forest was an old forest. And it was showing its age. Tall trees stretched up to the sky. But warm summer breezes shook their dry leaves stiffly. And their brittle branches often broke from the weight of scampering squirrels. (Sammy had lost count of the times he had nearly fallen to the ground.)

When a fire blazed through the Great Forest that summer, it burned every tree and it scorched every bush, until nothing remained but black stumps and gray ashes.

Sammy and his family escaped the fire. But their home had been in the trees, so now they had nowhere to live. It was the same with all the animals who had called the Great Forest home. After the fire there was no forest, there were no homes, there was no life.

In time a new forest began to grow. Fresh green shoots pushed their way up through the gray ashes. They stretched themselves out and took shape as a miniature forest of dense bushes and tender saplings.

The saplings grew until they became tall trees. Then Sammy, his family, and the other animals returned to a new Great Forest. It was like the old Great Forest. But it was not the same. The new Great Forest was young, strong, and flexible. And it was full of life. It was a wonderful place to be.

You could say that the Great Forest was resurrected.

Sermon

So much changes after a storm, especially after a big one. There’s work to do, lots of it. On the farm there are frightened animals to look after and fences to mend. In town there are trees to trim and roads to reopen. In New Orleans and coastal Mississippi, there are neighborhoods to rebuild and entire communities to recreate from the ground up.

Sometimes after a storm, especially a big one, a whole new world emerges. When lightning ignites a firestorm that destroys a forest, before long green shoots poke through the ashes. It's the first installment of a forest that is, as yet, unseen. All that's needed is patience. One day the mountains and the hills will burst into song, and the young trees will stretch themselves up to the heavens and clap their hands (cf. Isaiah 55:12).

As predicted, a storm swept through Jerusalem on Friday.

Early that morning the weather was fine. It was spring. It was festival time. A mood of celebration was in the air. But not everyone was in the mood for a party. Some thought it was a nice day for a hanging. And they had someone in mind.

By 9:00 that morning, the weather started to change. With each hammer blow, there was an echo of distant thunder. As Jesus's breath grew weaker, light began to drain from the sky. By noon it was as dark as night. Jesus's life was being eclipsed. And the earth shuddered.

Around mid-afternoon, though, the light returned. The storm had passed. Damage appeared to be minimal and localized. Just three men had died, all of them in one place. They should have known better than to be on the top of a hill during a storm.

Sometimes the extent of damage from a storm is not obvious at first.

We had an ice storm in Kalamazoo, Michigan in 1997. The sidewalks at our house were hazardous with thick ice. And falling branches had put a set of small dents into the roof of our car. That was it. Not bad, all in all. But a few hours later, the power went out. It stayed out for several days. That meant no heat in the house. And it meant no water, not for us, not for the dogs, not for five horses. Do you know how much water five horses drink? Yet our problems were small potatoes compared to what happens when the levee breaks a day and a half after the storm has passed.

To the casual observer, just three men died outside Jerusalem that Friday. But the damage was severe – at least for the apostles, for the women, and for all the others who had followed Jesus to Jerusalem. Jesus had warned them, but it didn't matter. They were still scattered, broken, and wrung out. It might have been easier to take had the storm not been so selective and so precise. Like a smart bomb, the storm took out Jesus, but left his followers untouched. Was the storm really that smart, or were they just that good at hiding?

They weren't dead, but without a doubt they were all damaged – damaged in heart, damaged in soul, damaged in spirit. They were damaged, each of them, on their own. And they were damaged as a community. Jesus was the Sun around whom they all orbited. When the Sun burns out, planets are not just demoted, as happened recently to Pluto. No, when the Sun burns out, planets drift away. They drift apart into a vast expanse of emptiness.

But not just yet. For the moment, there was some unfinished business. Jesus deserved a decent burial, and they intended to see to it. So the women prepared perfumed ointments. They would anoint his body with tender affection and say their farewells with a final act of love. But their intention would not be realized.

As predicted, the effects of Friday's storm were of limited duration.

Progress in New Orleans and on the Mississippi coast has been painfully slow. Life is being renewed. Communities are being rebuilt. Neighborhoods are being restored. But most agree, it seems, that what is emerging will be something less than what had been, that it will be something limited, something restricted, something inhibited.

But on that Sunday long ago, something grand emerged, something more than what had been, something not at all obvious at first, something hard to grasp, something impossible to believe. The

apostles “didn’t believe the women.” And Peter, for his part, didn’t know what to think. But, of course, the Lord’s ways are higher than our ways, and his thoughts than our thoughts (cf. Isaiah 55: 8,9).

The two radiantly clothed men said, “Why are you looking for the living among the dead?” Time would give their words a clearer inflection. They were not asking the women why they were looking for someone who happens to be alive in the place of the dead. Jesus was more than someone who happened to be alive. He was now “the living one.” He was not merely alive; he was alive in a new way. It was the new creation, long promised, hoped for for centuries, still hoped for today. It was the new creation come to birth in the midst of this old creation – and unlike New Orleans, it was something far more than what had been. “Everything old has passed away, everything has become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17 NRSV).

Sometimes unexpected life emerges after a storm.

So the life of God’s new creation emerged, after Friday’s storm, on Sunday morning. And that new creation life is ours through faith in Jesus Christ, who died and was raised for us, that we might be reconciled to God (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:15,18). The promise of new life is given to us in the Gospel, sealed to us in baptism, and nurtured within us through the holy supper.

The storm is over. The Sun has risen. It’s time to live.