

Up in Flames

Mark 16:1-7

Five years ago I took my wife Cyndi to Paris to celebrate our 25th anniversary. One of the highlights was Notre Dame Cathedral. How many of you have been? Construction began on it way back in 1163....and it took nearly 200 years to build! Think of that! To put it in perspective, if construction had begun the day our Declaration of Independence was signed, it would not have opened its doors until John F. Kennedy was president! Eight generations of craftsmen lived and worked and died knowing they would never see the finished result! But what a masterpiece they built! Flying buttresses ...moving the skeleton of the building outside, allowing a roof that soared and huge walls of stained glass that flooded the interior with light and color. Notre Dame was the religious and cultural heart of the city of Paris for 856 years.

So...with all of you...I was horrified on Monday to read that the cathedral was engulfed in flames. The video of the central spire collapsing was just sickening. One resident captured the trauma of the moment when he said, "Paris has been beheaded."

It was a disturbing start to Holy Week, wasn't it? A reminder of the time 2000 years ago when the greatest of hopes and dreams had gone up in flames; when a spiritual revolution had been beheaded. Jesus of Nazareth...that miracle working, life-giving, rule-breaking thorn in the side of the religious establishment, was suddenly dead. Crucified on a Friday by his enemies. Were it not for the kindness of a man named Joseph, his corpse would have been thrown on a burn pile with the rest of the criminals.

Instead, his body was laid in a borrowed tomb and a stone rolled in front of the door to keep out predators. Now Sunday has come and faithful women have returned to the tomb of Jesus. They are still numb; still grieving the loss of their Lord. But they are in for the shock of their lives...and it's a pretty shocking story. Are you ready to hear it?

When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint [Jesus]. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were terrified. And he said to them, "Do not be terrified. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you."

And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Maybe the women shouldn't have been so surprised. Jesus predicted this. Several times. He predicted his arrest and death. AND he predicted he would be raised to life on the third day. It seemed incredible at the time but then, everything Jesus did was incredible.

He touched the rotting flesh of lepers...and made their skin as smooth as a baby's butt. He told a paralyzed man to stand up and walk...and he did. He touched deaf ears and made them hear...blind eyes and made them see...withered arms and made them grow. He commanded an evil spirit named Legion to vacate a man...and he was set free. He fed thousands of people with a few fishes and loaves. He even raised people from the dead! Several! A man named Lazarus...the 12-year-old daughter of Jairus...the only son of a poor widow.

Jesus taught with power and courage and insight and wit like none had ever heard. And perhaps most revolutionary, Jesus loved the people society hated. Tax collectors... prostitutes ... drunkards... shepherds... outsiders...sinners...everyone society sneered at, Jesus smiled at. And welcomed. And loved. And forgave. I sat with a man this week...tears streaming down his face as he heard me tell him that Jesus loves him and forgives him.

No one...no one...no one ever did what Jesus of Nazareth did. No one. Ever. The teaching, the miracles, the exorcisms, the resurrections...no one was as powerful, as brave, as loving, as incredible, as indomitable as Jesus Christ. So when those who loved him, who had been healed and forgiven and restored by Jesus... watched him being spiked to a cross to die...they were gutted! Who could do such a thing to someone so beautiful? All their hopes...all their dreams...all their aspirations...up in flames.

When those women came to the tomb on Sunday morning, they weren't coming to greet a resurrected Jesus. These broken women were coming to wash the gore from his shattered body. They were coming to pay last respects. They were brave. And true. And faithful. But they were hopeless.

I wish Jesus' male disciples had been brave. Every one of them was in hiding. Every one of them. One of the proofs of the trustworthiness of the gospels is that they portray the apostles— as cowards in this moment. It's not a very impressive way to showcase the guys who would later lead the church...but it makes it even more believable. I wish men were spiritually braver than we are. But it was the women who had guts. The women who showed up at the tomb to finish the job. And it was those brave women who first learned the news that changed the world forever: Jesus is alive!

And as we will return to next week...on baptism weekend...even after they received this great news, the women were still in shock! Still terrified. They didn't yet believe their eyes and they didn't do what the angel told them to do! The idea that Jesus...whom they had seen brutally killed...could be raised to life... was just too much. A dead man walking? Impossible! Hopeless!

On Monday night, it sure looked hopeless. Reports said that the fire was out of control and the cathedral could probably not be save; that the organ was destroyed and the stained glass windows had exploded. On Monday night, it appeared that the whole thing would be lost. Hopeless. One Parisian wrote, "I felt powerless as the flames overtook the cathedral. It was unbearable." I texted my daughter Rachel and asked if she had ever visited Notre Dame. She summed up the regrets of millions when she replied, "No. Never did. Never will." Gone. Hopeless.

That is what Mary and the other women felt about Jesus. And about the life they had imagined for themselves. Gone. Hopeless. Up in flames.

I think you'd be amazed at how many here this evening/morning share that same sense of hopelessness. It might not be apparent; this is Gig Harbor after all. We have to put on a good front, whatever might actually be burning up in our lives. But I know people who are fighting cancer... fighting to save their marriage... fighting to save their kids ... fighting to save their career...fighting to save their sobriety.... fighting to save their reputation. For some of you, your beautiful Easter outfits mask heartbreak and despair.

And even if you might not put it quite so dramatically...like most of us men...there are plenty of us who are feeling enormous pressure to keep up appearances and performances and a pace that is unsustainable. No one else may know, but YOU feel the hopeless pressure of an out-of-control life. See this finger? I closed my car door on this finger last Sunday morning. I could feel my heartbeat throbbing on the tip of this swollen joint. I preached with it this way...I did more pointing than usual! No one knew...except for one front row woman who wondered why I was wearing purple fingernail polish. But I knew! The pressure was intolerable and unsustainable. (By the way, it's amazing what a red hot paper clip through the fingernail will do for that!)

If your life is BURNING UP ...or ...SQUEEZING DOWN...and you've begun to lose hope...could I just say, you've come to the right place at the right time. Easter is all about hope. And restoration. All about life rising up out of the ashes. When I turned on the news Tuesday morning, I could hardly believe my eyes. The fire was out. The walls were still standing and sound. The organ intact. The stained glass in one piece. President Macron had vowed that the cathedral would be rebuilt in five years and, by week's end, more than \$ 1 billion dollars had been pledged. It seemed a miracle.

You know, this wasn't the first time the cathedral fell into disrepair. Following the French Revolution, it was abused and neglected. When Victor Hugo wrote, "The Hunchback of Notre Dame," he hoped to raise interest in restoring the cathedral... which it did. One of the famous lines from his novel is a Latin phrase: Spira Spera. It means: Breathe. Hope. In other words, as long as there is breath...there is hope.

The gospel of Mark tells us that, as Jesus hung on the cross, he "...uttered a loud cry and breathed his last." No more breath. No more hope. All was gone. But in the early hours of that first Easter, as Jesus' cold corpse lay on its stone bed, a miracle occurred. The Spirit of God--who created everything out of nothing--touched his lifeless body. His heart began to beat. His skin began to warm. His eyes began to flutter. And then...in the most dramatic moment in the history of the world...Jesus gasped! Turns out his last breath on the cross wasn't his last breath after all! Spira. Spera. Breathe. Hope.

That same Holy Spirit invited you here today. You might think it was your idea...but it was God's. And there are some sitting here who feel like their life is smoldering...maybe even burning up. Perhaps you feel like it is beyond repair; beyond hope. I want you to hear me when I share with you this timeless Easter promise: Jesus is alive. Today. Right here. He breathes...his Spirit...upon you. And if you will receive that gift... that is all the hope you need. Spira Spera.