

My mother's side of the family gathers for family reunions once every five years. For the most part, the gatherings happen where the family has its roots – in a small town in New Hampshire. Part of the week's festivities always includes a tour of two local cemeteries where generations of our ancestors have their final resting place. Not only is it a way to teach the younger generations where all the various graves are located, but it's also a wonderful way to help people wrap their heads around the family tree – who is related to whom and how the various branches are connected.

Now this might be serious business for the adults, but for the young kids, an open cemetery is nothing but a huge fenced-in playground. And boy, do the kids run around and play!

I will never forget what happened after one of these family reunions. This was when our girls were small. We were driving home and everyone was quiet in the back seats of the van, when one of them suddenly shouted out – “Hurray! Cemetery!” – as we drove by a cemetery. (I'm sure that child was remembering the fun time she had running around a cemetery only a few days earlier.)

Now how many of you shout out in glee, “Hurray! Cemetery!” when you pass a cemetery? I didn't think many of you did. Sooner or later, for all of us, it happens. When confronted with the dark realities of death, cemeteries seem more like prisons than playgrounds. Sooner or later, more often than not, visits to cemeteries are accompanied by tears, not laughter.

Ask Mary Magdalene. Ask Simon Peter. Ask James or John. “Hurray!” was NOT on their hearts or lips early in the morning of the first day of the first week after Jesus was killed on the cross. Imagine the complex swirl of emotions they must have felt that morning. For the past three years Jesus had been talking about a future that was bright and good. Just last week, they all came into Jerusalem with lots of followers and big celebrations – certain that what Jesus had been saying was about to become a reality. But... what happened? Was Jesus wrong? Were they just another group of gullible people? Or had they screwed up and caused all of this horror? After all, Matthew was a tax collector – had his sin now caught up to him? Peter had denied Jesus three times, just days before. Perhaps Peter wondered if the outcome would have been different if he had stood up for Jesus. And Mary Magdalene – scripture says that she had fallen prey to seven demons – Jesus cast out those demons. Were they now loose and therefore the cause of all of this? In short, were they the guilty ones? Did they screw up?

Can you imagine how horrible they must have felt? Can you imagine how dark and even sinister life must have looked like to them?

Well, as the text says, early in the morning while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene made her way to the tomb. You wonder if she was using the cover of

darkness to try to shield herself from something or someone. Anyway she gets there; she discovers the stone rolled away and the body gone. This had to have been the crowning blow.

She ran back to the disciples with the news: they have taken the Lord out of the tomb! It seems that whomever “they” were had won. Some of the disciples ran to the tomb to check out Mary’s story and sure enough, the body was gone. The disciples didn’t hang around in the pre-dawn hours to see what might happen next. It seemed to be a done deal.

But Mary hung around and what happened next changed everything for her, changed everything for you, changed everything for me, and changed everything for all people for all time. You know what happened: The risen Jesus showed up! He rose from the dead, just as he had said.

This past Wednesday morning, Felix Perez, our Outreach and Mission Specialist, made arrangements for Zach Wheeler to come and do a piece on our labyrinth, prayer vigil for WETM. For those of you who are here today from out of town, WETM is one of two local TV stations and Zach Wheeler is the anchor and host of the early morning news show, Monday through Friday.

Well, what was supposed to be a quick 15 minute, in and out, appointment for him on Wednesday turned into over an hour. We got to talking. I found out that he is the Worship Leader at the Leverington Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He has quite a lot of experience in the various judicatories of the Presbyterian Church. I was impressed.

Anyway, in the on-camera interview, he asked me what I was going to preach on this Sunday. And I said, “Hope. I’m going to preach hope because there’s a lot of darkness in the world right now – and what’s more, a lot of people are carrying a lot of darkness in their souls – along with a lot of angst and anxiety.” As I said that I was thinking about all the horrible things that have happened – you know, from people being burned out of their homes to school shootings to wars and rumors of wars, not to mention all the trouble people face like deep hurt, sickness, sin, guilt, unemployment, addiction, divorce, and loneliness. (Doesn’t that list depress you?) And so I continued saying, “And what I’ve been thinking a lot about lately is how God makes new life emerge out of darkness. When you read Genesis chapter one, God created the universe and the world that we know out of the chaos and darkness of what Genesis calls “the deep.” Each of us is born out of the darkness of a womb. When you plant a seed, it goes into the dark ground and emerges with new life as a plant. When we celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism, we say, of its many, many meanings, that, as we are descending into the waters, we are descending into death with Jesus and we rise up out of those waters into new life. Then, of course, there’s Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, for we know that new life emerged out of the darkness of that tomb.

I told Zach that I have hope because with the resurrection of Jesus, I know that God is not absent when we are in dark times, but that God is very present working in

the very powerful ways that God works – ways that only God can work bringing new life out of the darkest and out of the most sinister situations. And I know that most vividly because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It was at that point that Zach pulled the microphone that he had up to my mouth back and put it on his shoulder and said to me, “That’s really beautiful. You’re going to preach that on Easter Sunday, aren’t you?” And I said, “Yes I am.” (and by the way, I just did.)

You know I know that sometimes when God is making new life emerge out of darkness, it is hard to recognize it. Sometimes, when the living Jesus is at work among us bringing about new life, it takes a long time to really see and comprehend what’s happening. Mary Magdalene was willing to linger in the dark, shadowy cemetery where the tomb of Jesus was empty. It was a good thing she hung in there and lingered, unlike the disciples who took off and ran away. By waiting, she got to see Jesus. The rest of the disciples missed him. Sometimes we have to have patience and wait for the new life to come. And sometimes it is just plain hard to recognize what God is doing. Initially, Mary mistook the risen Jesus for the gardener. Sometimes he doesn’t look the way we expect him to look or act the way we expect him to act – which is why we need the church, so that we can help each other recognize the living Christ and the new life God is causing to emerge.

The Bible has a word for God working in darkness and dark times. That word is “salvation.” To me salvation is the experience of being rescued and set free. (Have you experienced God rescuing you and setting you free?) It’s the faith-filled conviction that nothing will ever beat you. It’s the experience of the fact that God always gives us second chances like Jesus gave Peter a second chance to witness after Peter had denied him three times. It’s the trust that God is stronger than any threat. For me personally, the difference that the resurrection of Jesus makes is I know that God has power to make good things come from darkness. And that gives me the faith and confidence that love, not hate wins, and goodness not evil, will prevail.

Look at the difference the resurrection Jesus made in Mary’s life. For Mary changed everything about her life. She changed from weeping to witnessing. Her past was forgiven. Her present life now had a mission and her future was now secure. She transformed from being helpless girl to being a woman with a purpose and on a mission.

And now it’s your turn: this world is not just where Jesus died. It is the world where Jesus now lives – even today. If someone asked you what difference that makes in your life today, what would you say?