

A HARVEST OF DYING AND RISING

John 12:24

I Corinthians 15:19-26

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It's not very often that a preacher gets to talk about Easter in November, but how can we have a worship series called "Winning Isn't Everything" without talking about the story of the biggest defeat and the biggest victory in the Bible, the story that is at the heart of the Christian story.

Our purpose for these five weeks is to encourage all of us to accept that loss and failure and disappointment are a part of every life, and that those experiences have lessons to teach us. I want to state very clearly what I am NOT saying. I am NOT saying, "Everything happens for a reason." That's not biblical, and I believe it's blatantly unhelpful, dangerous even. I'm also NOT saying that God causes or allows bad things to happen in our lives in order to teach us lessons. Only a cruel and sadistic being would do that, not a God who loves us.

But clearly we live in a world where bad things happen. No one gets through life without grief, failure, loss and disappointment. Our culture that worships victory and heaps praise on winners tends to encourage us to gloss over the bad times, but if you don't sit with them long enough to learn from them, you'll miss out on some of life's most valuable opportunities to grow.

Last Sunday afternoon, several of us met to talk about the grief journey, a journey we will all take at some point in our lives. There is a little saying about grief that sounds trite but is really quite profound: "There is no way around grief. But there is a way to get through it." I picture the difficult walk of grief like a house. You stand outside looking at

the front door of the house. You know that the backyard of the house is a place where the pain is easier to bear. All of your friends who have walked this journey before you have told you this. You look for a way to walk around the house to the backyard, but there are no openings in the yard. You have to walk all the way through the house. The first step through the threshold into the doorway is the hardest; you truly don't think you can bear it. There are so many rooms in the house you can't see them all. Just when you think you're about to get to the backdoor there's another corridor, but finally one day you realize you've made it. You can open the back door and step outside. You're not jumping for joy, you will always carry a sadness with you, but that heaviness in your heart is gone. You can laugh without feeling guilty. You have things to look forward to that bring you joy. It has been a long process, but you've learned so much along the way, and you can use those lessons to help others, which is an added source of meaning and blessing. The way through grief is not fun, it's not pleasant, but it is a way that brings you to a place of renewed life.

There is a wisdom found not just in the writings of scholars but in the mystery of nature itself. Some things have to die so that new things can be born. In the gospel of John, Jesus says, "If a grain of wheat falls into the earth, and dies, it will bear much fruit." Now a seed doesn't exactly die, but it does stop being a seed. It becomes, underground in the cold, something new. Look at these seeds that start out looking like seeds but gradually change themselves completely. A seed dies to its old life so that it may transform itself into a plant. Caterpillars spin cocoons and live in them, almost like tombs, until they are able to die to their old selves and be reborn as something new and beautiful.

Jesus says, If a grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies, it's just a grain of wheat - a single seed - forever. It will blow away or be eaten and its usefulness is fin-

ished. But if that grain of wheat is planted, if it spends time underground, well, then it will become an entire plant.

Some things have to die so that new things can be born.

Have you noticed this wisdom at work in your life? We tend to want to hang on to old habits, ways of spending time that we're accustomed to, but if you say "no" to one thing, all of a sudden there's an opening in your life and you can say "yes" to something new. I was so impressed this fall when two parents in the church approached me about wanting to get more involved. One of them has an 8th grader and one of them has a 9th grader. I don't even think they know each other, but they each said the same thing, "It will only be a few years before I have an empty nest, my child will be in college, and I want to begin preparing now for the ways I can use my time meaningfully, so I want to start getting to know more about the church and my place in it." Instead of seeing the empty nest as something to dread, these two parents are choosing to see it as a new opportunity. Something will change, and something new will be born.

At a conference a few years ago I met an Episcopal priest named Bob who told me this story about his son Alex. It was a few weeks after Easter, and he was tucking three-year-old Alex into bed. Alex looked at a blister on Bob's hand and said, "Dad, are you Jesus?" Bob said, "No, Alex, I'm not Jesus." "But you've got a mark on your hand just like Jesus." "It's just a blister from working in the yard." Alex said, "Jesus' mark was from a nail." Then, with the imagination of a three-year old, he said, "I'd like to see you nailed to a cross, Dad." "Why do you say that, Alex? Jesus died on the cross." "No, Dad, he didn't die." "He did really die, Alex, but then he came back to life." Without missing a beat, Alex said, "Have you ever done that, Dad? Die and come back to life?"

What Bob couldn't tell Alex until much later is that yes, it's happened. It happens in the course of every human life when things die and new things are born. Hopes and dreams die and we grieve the future we thought we'd have, but then, gradually, new possibilities are born. In fact, Bob saw Alex die to the life he'd known in the womb when he witnessed the miracle of his birth.

There are moments when life seems all about death and loss, and then there are moments that feel like resurrection. In the book of Romans, Paul says, "We are united with Jesus in a death like his, and we are united with Jesus in a resurrection like his." And in the passage Bill/Cynthia read for us today, Paul writes, "Everyone dies and everyone will be given life in Christ." It is like a harvest of dying and rising.

The best-selling author Glennon Doyle has spoken frequently in public about her struggles with an eating disorder, with addiction, and about her time spent in a mental hospital as a teenager. She writes this, "You can be shattered, and then you can put yourself back together piece by piece. In the process, you may wake up one day and realize that you have put yourself back together completely differently. That you are whole, finally, and strong, but that you are a different shape. This type of change is what occurs when you sit inside your own pain, and it's revolutionary. When you let your old self die, there is suddenly one day new life. First the pain, then the rising."

As we near the end of this worship series, and as we approach the end of 2019 and the end of this decade, an interesting question to sit with is this one: "Is there anything in your life that it's time to let go of, so that something new can be born?" Are there habits that no longer serve you, that no longer fit the person you want to be, the purpose you feel called to live? Is there something you want to say "no" to so that something new can be born?

The story of the resurrection tells us that death and evil and fear do not have the last word. When you read the Holy Week story, you can almost hear the sounds of the crowd and know who's winning and who's losing at any moment in the story. Have you ever left a sporting event early, and as you're walking to your car, you can tell if you missed something really important happening in the game? The crowd will be shouting happily or there will be a collective groan. As Jesus enters Jerusalem on the day we call Palm Sunday, it's a victory for his message. He enters defiantly and with great courage. He knows that he has powerful enemies. He has provoked them by spending time with the wrong kind of people - with those considered unclean, with women, with children. He has stirred up opposition by telling stories about Good Samaritans - that was an oxymoron in Jesus' time. He's enraged the people who follow the letter of the law by encouraging a different kind of interpretation, and by healing on the Sabbath. He has preached and lived the law of love, and threatened all of the power structures around him. But on Palm Sunday the crowds are with him.

On Friday the Jesus who entered Jerusalem accompanied by cheers five days earlier is now being dragged through the streets, beaten and carrying a cross. Some of the very same fair-weather fans who waved palm branches are now watching him suffer, and when Friday ends, it looks as though the gospel of love has been destroyed for good.

Jesus endures the shame and the pain, the humiliation and the defeat. The death was real, as my friend Bob said to his three-year-old son. But somehow the good news prevails. Hope is reborn on Sunday morning, on the day we now call Easter, and it is the story that provides the template for our lives.

We do not have to live as the people we've always been, fearful and ashamed. New life is always possible, through the pain, through the grief, through the work. First the pain, then the rising.

And we don't have to do it all ourselves, either. The Easter story is at the heart of the Christian story, but the Christmas story is where it begins. Theologians call the Christmas story "incarnation" - literally becoming flesh. God chooses to enter the world to become one of us, to bridge the gap between what is human and what is divine. So that God will know what our lives are like, and so that we will remember that we are not alone.

I can't think of any better reason to give thanks this week than this. We have a God who loves us unconditionally, who wants the best for us, and who gives us new chances again and again to become the people we were created to be.