

A Resurrection of Hope
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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March 6, 2022

John 11:1-44

Let's begin with a little bit of history...

The period of time we call 'early church' starts with the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70 and ends with Christianity becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire in 313. The apostles and other followers of Jesus had scattered following the first Jewish Revolt in 66 A.D. Many of them became martyrs and died for their faith, others founded religious communities in far-flung places like Antioch, Alexandria and Rome.

At first, these early church communities worshipped in a very unstructured way. They gathered in secret locations throughout the Mediterranean, like the catacombs that ran under city streets or the parlors of wealthy widow's homes. They continued to follow Jewish Law, although their Temple had been destroyed. They read the words of the Prophets and sang many of the Psalms. They held no formal creeds or confessions in common, just simple affirmations of faith, such as "Jesus is Lord".

They were taught to anticipate the imminent return of Jesus Christ, and yet, the first generation who actually knew him had begun to die, so they wrote down all the stories that were passed down by their founders.

Sometimes we forget how life-changing a story the Raising of Lazarus might have been to those who heard it first. Surviving as they did during a time of violent religious persecution, these words brought comfort and hope. It opened the door of possibility, unbound them from the expectations of death and turned them towards life.

Mary and Martha have been traveling with, working with, and likely funding Jesus and his ministry. They have witnessed wonders beyond description. In the first century, any illness was quite serious; there were no antibiotics, and sickness (more often than not), preceded death.

They knew that Jesus had it within him to heal Lazarus. Can you imagine their disappointment when Jesus says that he will wait to visit him? And Lazarus does die. When Jesus finally arrives, the sisters and the village are in full mourning.

Martha greets him with words of anger and accusation. One wonders what was going through her mind. Was this the final straw? Was she ready to stop following him? Certainly each of us have had moments of wondering where God was in our time of trial or loss. And it is in that place of wondering, where Jesus shows up.

There had been a lot of acts of violence lately outside a particular high school in East Jerusalem... teens throwing rocks at soldiers, soldiers throwing tear gas canisters and shooting rubber bullets in return.

Think about it... if you had to walk past soldiers who you consider to be foreign occupiers on your way to school, you might be tempted to act out too.

On the flip side, imagine yourself as an inexperienced young Israeli soldier just a year or two older than these students, fulfilling your mandatory conscription time. Perhaps, like many, you were taught to never trust an Arab, any insult from one of them might cause you to retaliate in any number of violent ways.

This was the neighborhood I found myself visiting every week during my time as an ecumenical accompanier with the Council of Churches five years ago. Our non-violent, international presence was supposed to help everyone be a little less reactionary. That was the goal, at least.

So there we are in this village, we're kind of new and the teens don't know us yet. We had only been in the area for a month or so, and none of us spoke much Hebrew or Arabic. Our team was made up of myself (an American), along with a Korean, a Swede and two Norwegians.

The day started off quiet, soldiers had not yet arrived at their morning post. We stood at the top of the stairs greeting the children as they ascended the steep hill to the high school. Girls looked smart in their burgundy track suits with matching hijab and the boys were dressed in typical street clothes. Some met our eyes with a smile, others didn't.

A group of teens began to gather about 20 feet away from us, whispering, laughing and looking sideways at each other. That's when an older boy, probably about 17 years old, picked up a small stone and threw it in our direction. His friend picked up another and followed his example. The first thrower missed. The second one hit my right foot (not hard enough to hurt).

That's when I heard the still, small voice within me say "go talk to them". *Because what could be easier than walking up to a dozen teens you've never met, and striking up a conversation in a language you don't speak, in the middle of a conflict zone?*

"Hey!" I called out. "Saba Ilher" (which is Arabic for good morning)...

I began slowly walking towards the group, my hands open in what I hoped they'd take as a friendly gesture. When I reached them, I told them what my name was, and that I was from the United States... and that was the extent of what I was able to say to them.

Thankfully, one of them helped me translate to the group that I was there with my friends to watch and see that they got to school safely. I asked them who they were, and they responded with laughter and smiles at my initial attempts at Arabic.

Discreetly, I saw them put the stones they were holding in their hands down.

I could have left when that boy aimed the first rock at me, hopped on a municipal bus and returned safely to our flat, and no one would have blamed me. But by listening to that inner voice, going to talk with them in all of my adultly awkwardness, turned out to be what was needed in that moment.

So much could have gone wrong if they decided not to listen to me, if they chose not to take my bait. They could have thrown another rock and injured a smaller child unintentionally, maybe even one of their own sisters or brothers! They could have been arrested; the punishment for rock-throwing is 20 years in jail, whether or not the perpetrator is a minor. It might have escalated if the soldiers hadn't been late.

Imagine just for a moment what it must be like to live your childhood in such a troubled place. Imagine being a teen who is so full of anger that you'd rather throw a rock and sit in jail until your mid-thirties rather than walk away from a conflict. Imagine being a parent whose child has so few safe places to grow and play, so you watch out your kitchen window every afternoon, praying that your son or daughter comes home safe.

I think that when the early church told the story of the death of Lazarus, they were speaking about new life and possibility. Just when Mary and Martha thought there was no hope, Jesus was there. Just when the disciples felt their faith had been in vain, they discovered that hope never dies.

Jesus modeled for us the right to feel and show emotions like love and grief, and empathy for others, just as he showed anger in the temple. Emotions are in the image of God and it is okay to feel them.

But the question on my mind, and maybe yours this week, is how do we walk with Ukraine in all of their grief and despair? What emotions and actions are hope-filled? What can we do so far away that might bring peace to the land and her people?

Even when all seems to be lost, we can allow God to act on our hearts and the situation at hand. Perhaps, joining in the lament that is circling the globe will cause a ripple effect. Maybe -someday- God will grant us the compassion and empathy to hear those who suffer so that we all might receive the gift of resurrection; not only in our small circles of relationships, but in our world.

May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.