

Rising from the Ashes – John 20:1-18
April 21, 2019

Please pray with me. Holy One, renew our wonder and open our hearts this Easter Day and every day. Help us to see the resurrection anew in our every day lives and every day traumas. Give us the faith to know we can lean on you. Amen.

In Isaiah 65, verse 17, the prophet Isaiah affirms God’s love “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.” God, through Isaiah, is speaking to the Israelites here, but his words still touch us today. I have to believe that our good Baptist brothers and sisters in Louisiana are taking great comfort and strength from promises such as this as they mourn the burning of three predominantly black churches. Many others, especially our good Catholic friends, are mourning the loss, although not a total loss, of the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris.

And it is interesting and heartening to see that these two, or actually four events are now inexplicably linked. The three churches in Louisiana burned as a result of arson and fund raising was underway by the St. Landry Parish which they were all a part of, but it was not moving at a fast pace – last Tuesday a GoFundMe page had raised only \$150,000 of the \$1.8 million needed to rebuild the three churches. By Wednesday the fund had skyrocketed to more than the \$1.8 million goal. Why? Because of awareness spread on social media, spurred by the fire at Notre Dame Cathedral, which is thought to be an accident, caused by a shorted electrical circuit. Notre Dame Cathedral is an internationally known landmark and symbol of spirituality which gained the attention of millions of people and blessedly that attention spread to the lesser publicized Louisiana fires. From the anguish and pain brought about by these four fires, resurrection.

I was reminded of this once again on Thursday night as I sat across from a member of the Standish Congregational Church during our soup and bread supper which preceded our Maundy Thursday service. He is a long-time member and vividly recalled the night the Standish church caught fire and burned in a severe thunder and lightning storm. He recalled hearing the fire whistle and thinking that something had been hit badly and then learning a few minutes later that it was the beloved church and what a sickening feeling that was. The church and the congregation rose from the ashes and a lovely new church now close to 15 years old, and a closely-knit congregation stand in place of the lovely old church. I am sure there are a few long-time members who still wish they had the old church they were so familiar with, one that held so many memories. As Bill Nemitz wrote in Wednesday's *Portland Press Herald*, when a church falls victim to fire or even simply the passage of time, it is more than a mere building that is mourned.

Burning churches are not the only traumas in our lives that require us to rise from the ashes so to speak. Horrific accidents that kill – the freak accident that killed Det. Ben Campbell, a young State Trooper, husband and father in Millinocket recently. The armed robbery gone wrong in Alabama that led to the death of Shawn McGeough of Westbrook and the recent murder of a young Marine, Tyler Wallingford from Standish, in his barracks in South Carolina are just a few horrendous examples of the tragedies faced by people every day. There are just too many examples.

When tragedies happen, we tell people to look for God in the helpers, the fire personnel, police, doctors, and nurses. Easter is about the tragedies in our lives and how we get through them and how we – to some extent – get over them. I was particularly touched as I watched the funeral service for Detective Campbell on TV

and saw Rev. Kate Braestrup, the Maine Warden Service Chaplain on the stage. The Maine State Police Chaplain explained that he had called Kate to be with Det. Campbell's wife, Hillary, and guide her because Kate had lost her husband, Drew, also a Maine State Trooper, in the late 1990's, leaving her a single Mom with four young children. Kate spoke, from experience, very movingly about what Hillary was going through and how to best help her move forward. She also talked about how close the law enforcement family is and how much Hillary and her son would be cared for by that family. What better helper in a tragedy than to have someone walking beside you who has already walked in those footsteps themselves. We might call it a Godsend. We can never bring Det. Campbell back – resurrection is not resuscitation, but rather new life brought forth from tragedy.

I thought of multiple examples as I thought about resurrection. One of the first that came to mind was that of Mary Anthoine who lost both her legs below the thigh in December 2017 when she was pinned between two cars in a parking lot in Portland. I remember wondering at the time how I would handle such a tragedy and would I have the mental, spiritual and physical strength to handle it as Mary did. By all accounts she cheerfully began rehab, was fitted for prostheses and despite being greatly reduced in height, was learning to bowl again, regaining one of her favorite pastimes. This definitely is not resuscitation – she will never get those legs back or her old life – new life springing from tragedy – resurrection.

On that first Easter, tragedy turned into Resurrection despite the fact the disciples ran away on Friday – or at best watched from a distance lest they themselves be arrested. We know our first responders don't run away. The question is, do we run away or do we stop to help?

The traumas and tragedies in our lives can come in all different sizes and degrees of hurt. It is how we are able to deal with them that tells the story. And sometimes it is easier to deal with them than other times. Sometimes, no matter how much faith we have, it is so difficult to see a Resurrection. Sometimes we are so much like Mary Magdalene, Peter and the disciple Jesus loved.

Easter and the Resurrection are a mystery bigger than life. Not resuscitation of an old life, but new life springing from the ashes. No matter the circumstances, it will never be the same whether it is a beloved church that is lost, a loved one who will never be coming home again, or some other circumstance. Jesus teaches us to have faith – faith to trust in him. Amen.