

Resurrection of Our Lord (RCL/A): “Tornadoes, Demolition and Resurrection”
Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 28:1-10
April 9, 2023
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

It was a week ago Saturday and our Confirmation Connection kids and guides were gathered in the upstairs youth room, watching a little video related to the part of the Lord’s Prayer. At about 7:30 **all** of our phones went off with a tornado warning. A 2nd floor room with windows on 3 sides isn’t the ideal spot to “shelter in place,” so off we went to the basement hallway for the next 45 minutes or so. Even in the cellar the sound of hail pelting the building was **really** loud. The lights flickered several times. A rain-bedraggled mom arrived, reporting no street lights, trees down in the road, sheets of rain that made it difficult to see. We said a prayer for homeless people out in the storm, for everyone in the storm’s path, for first responders, for a dad whose responsibility is to get the lights back on after a power outage, for the animals out in the elements. Then one of the kids said, “What if we went upstairs and there wasn’t anything there??” What if the church were like Dorothy’s house in Kansas, swept away by a tornado?

Heaven forbid! Sea Girt Army Camp got hit worst, with roofs torn off buildings (though, thank Heaven, no one was hurt). That’s just 1.6 miles away by car, less as the crow flies or as the tornado travels. Apparently the tornado barreled right down Sea Girt Ave.: that’s just ½ a mile away. The Lord preserved our buildings and lives through yet another potentially lethal storm.

St. Matthew reports cataclysmic, weird meteorological events in his description of Jesus’ Passion, death and resurrection. There’s an eclipse from noon to 3 p.m. as Jesus hangs on the cross; as we sang in “Were You There?” on Friday evening, “the sun refused to shine.” Then Jesus dies and the earth shakes, to the point that stones blocking the opening of grave caves shift and crack. As Jesus descends to the dead, the dead are awakened. Their graves are split open so when

Jesus is raised on the third day, they are free to exit, “enter the holy city and appear to many” (Matthew 27:53). It’s an odd detail only St. Matthew adds. Let me be quick to say these aren’t horror movie zombies; they’re not the “living dead” – they’re the **resurrected** dead. As we shall be one day.

The week before the tornado there was a lot of action on South St. here in Manasquan. Neary-Quinn funeral home was demolished. One day I went by and the bulldozers and steam shovels were parked there, ready for action. The next day the outer walls were gone and I could see the interior staircase. The day after just the first floor was left. The day after that, nothing. Just a hole in the ground. As if a storm had picked it up and blown it away, foundation and all.

Many, if not most of you, have been in Neary-Quinn at some point or another. Maybe you’ve simply paid your respects to an acquaintance or perhaps you’ve buried an immediate family member from there. Offhand I can’t count the number of times I’ve officiated at Neary-Quinn since I came to Manasquan. If all the tears shed in that building over 70 or so years were gathered together, they’d cause a flood or fill an aquarium: an aquarium filled with “holy water.” In the movie *The Shack*, the Holy Spirit appears as a Latina woman. Somebody is crying and she approaches with a vial that she holds against his cheek. He recoils a little and asks what she is doing. She explains she is collecting his tears, which She treasures and which She will save. How fitting for the Person of the Holy Trinity whose nickname is “Comforter” ...

The funeral directors and staff at Neary-Quinn became friends over the years. I was sad to see it close (a year or two ago?), sad to see the pretty garden unkempt, sad to see the gorgeous holly trees, home of the mockingbirds, cut down, sad to witness the demolition. And then I thought: Easter is coming! What better time to remember that, when death is done, there will be no need of funeral homes.! It reminds me of this Scripture so often read at graveside:

⁵⁵ *“Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?”*

... ⁵⁷ ... *thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*
(1 Corinthians 15)

There’s another earthquake in St. Matthew’s Gospel, the one that occurs in that great scene where the blindingly bright angel descends from Heaven, rolls away the stone as the earth shakes and quakes, and then, surprisingly, **sits** on it! Meanwhile, the soldiers who were assigned to “guard” the dead man keel over as if they’re dead themselves! The women who’ve come to see the tomb have impeccable timing and observe the whole thing. They must have stronger constitutions than the men, because they do **not** faint. They are more-than-alert-enough to hear and obey the angel’s message: *“Do not be afraid... Come, see... go quickly and tell....”* (Matt. 28:6-7) That’s a lot like the message the angels gave the shepherds on the night our Lord was born! *“Don’t be afraid... Go, see...”* The shepherds **did** go and see the Child in the manger, then they went quickly and told anyone who would listen (Luke 2:8-20)!

There are **two** women who witness the descent of the angel and rolling away of the stone, **two** who encounter the living Lord. **Two** was the magic number in a Jewish court of law for testimony to be admissible; but the testimony of women wasn’t acceptable, according to the Law. So we are told this is therefore a story for “insiders,” who would know the value and importance of women in Jesus’ band of disciples and in the early Christian community. These women, Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” (quite possibly Jesus’ mother), become the first witnesses to the resurrection. They are also entrusted with the message that the risen Lord isn’t holding the male disciples’ desertion and denial of Him against them: He will meet them in Galilee, just as planned.

We aren’t witnesses of the Lord’s physical resurrection like His first disciples, but we **are** called to witness to the risen Lord’s presence among us in Word & Sacrament, in the community of

faith, in the last, the lost, the least whom we serve in His name. When I spoke to the children during Good Morning, Good Friday, I reminded them that we are a faith family, and every family has stories to tell, sad and happy stories, that need to be told so they will be remembered. If stories aren't told, we forget who and Whose we are: where we came from and where we're headed together. So we **teach** the story to empower us all to **tell** the story.

In today's reading from the Book of Acts, Peter refers to *"us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him,"* blessed to *"receive forgiveness of sins through his name"* (Acts 10:41-42). We, too, have been chosen by God as witnesses, and **we**, too, eat and drink with Him every time we share this Holy Supper. In Holy Baptism and in Holy Communion **we** receive the forgiveness of sins. It's incredible, life-saving, hope-engendering, despair-defeating news to be shared. People may know the broad outline of the Christmas and Easter stories, have some idea of what our Lord and Savior did, but the most compelling witness we can give is to the living presence of Christ with us today. People need to know God's mercy is greater than their sin. People need to know they are precious and beloved children of God. People need to hear that Jesus spread out His arms on the cross and said to each of us and to all of us [say it together!]: "I love you this much!" By God's grace, our deeds will match our words, and the presence of the risen Lord will be channeled through us, the Word becoming flesh each day, in sunshine and in storm, in the midst of life and in the wake of death, in the classroom and in the basement, during tornado warnings and on Easter Sunday, as we celebrate our beginnings and grieve our endings, as we live our lives in the beautiful aftermath of Jesus' resurrection and in grateful anticipation of our own. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

