

Easter 4, Year C
May 12, 2019
St. James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

Last month, I managed to avoid reading
any of the 20th anniversary memorial retrospectives
about the Columbine shootings.
With the anniversary falling, as it did, during Holy Week,
I had plenty of other things to occupy my time and my thoughts.
But the truth is, I simply couldn't bear
to read anything more about Columbine.
I did not *want* to revisit that time.
Twenty years on, it's still too painful.
I still can't speak of the events of that day
and its aftermath
without crying.

Then, just when I thought I had made it safely through
that treacherous emotional minefield,
the shootings on Tuesday at the STEM School in Highlands Ranch
brought it all back,
whether I wanted to go there or not.

Once again, our community is plunged into grief and despair
over a young life tragically lost,
and our fears about the safety of our children
have been cruelly laid bare.

We grieve the death of 18-year-old Kendrick Castillo,
and we pray for the other children who were injured,
and our hearts go out to all the families
who were traumatized by the dreadful events of Tuesday.
Like the widows of Joppa,
we stand weeping over the loss of one so good,
who died too soon.
Oh, how we long for someone like Peter,
who through prayer alone,
was able to restore Tabitha to life.

Peter, where are you now?
For we could surely use you.

But we know better than to expect that kind of miracle.
As 21st century Christians,
we rightly regard such stories of
somehow bringing the dead back to life
with suspicion.
We don't expect saints to come along
and restore life to the dead.

And yet, we DO tend to expect God
to keep us and our loved ones safe from harm
in the first place.
And when God fails to do that,
sometimes our faith get shattered,
right along with our lives,
when violence or illness or some other catastrophic event
robs us of the life we thought we were entitled to.

Today's vision from the Revelation to John
clearly spells out that pain and suffering
will inevitably be a part of life.

Those standing before the throne and before the Lamb
have come out of the great ordeal.
They are in need of shelter.
They have known hunger and thirst and scorching heat.
They have tears in their eyes.
They have suffered, just as we suffer.

But this is only a part of the story.
And it's not the end of the story.
This passage of Scripture moves us beyond suffering
to a vision of how victory is finally won.
And it's a vision that runs counter
to how our culture usually defines victory.

Our culture says "The one with the most toys wins."
"Those with the biggest houses win."

“Those holding the biggest guns win.”

But in Revelation, we hear again the message
that none of these definitions of victory
match the victory of the Christian life.
Because for Christians,
the ultimate victory comes in death.

It is so important for us to hear this message during Eastertide,
when we proclaim again and again
what the death of Christ means for us.
Dying and rising in Christ
is how we become victors.

Joining that great multitude in John’s vision,
we, too, recognize our Shepherd
in the Lamb at the center of the throne,
who will guide us to springs of living water
where God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

Listening to the promise in this text,
and to the promise we hear in our gospel reading,
how nothing and no one will ever snatch us
out of God’s hand,
we can learn a lot about letting go.
Letting go of our definitions of what victory looks like.
Letting go of our need to control all the circumstances of our lives.
Letting go of our assumptions about what we feel we’re entitled to.

It teaches us, too, about how God can take the most awful events
in the life of a community,
and redeem them for us,
heal our society’s brokenness,
and replace our sorrow with hope.

You know, our gospel passage today begins
by telling us that it was winter,
and Jesus was walking in the Temple
at the Time of the festival of Dedication.
Does anyone here know what the Festival of Dedication is?

Today, it goes by another name
with which we might be more familiar.
Today, we call it the feast of Hanukkah.

The story of Hanukkah goes back to 170 BCE.
In that year, the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes (*An-TIE-o-kus Ee-PIFF-uh-nees*)
attacked Jerusalem,
and 80,000 Jews died.
Many more were sold into slavery.
It was a horrible time for the Jews.
The invaders desecrated the Temple.
They banned the Jewish religion.
They destroyed copies of the Torah.
They prohibited the rite of circumcision.
Parents who disobeyed the law,
and were discovered to have circumcised their sons,
were crucified,
and the bodies of their circumcised sons
were hung around their necks.

Then, in 168 BCE, Antiochus set up an idol
of the pagan god Zeus
right inside the Temple.
This idol became known to the Jews as “the abomination of desolation.”
Jesus speaks of it in the 24th chapter of Matthew,
because 200 years later they still hadn’t gotten over it.
In today’s terms,
it was as if a statue of Robert E. Lee
was erected along the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama.
It was an insult that could not be tolerated.

But this was not the end of the story.
A Jewish leader named Judas Maccabeus arose,
who incited the Jews to revolt against Antiochus in 164 BCE,
and to take back the Temple,
and to cleanse it of this abomination
and to rededicate it to God.

According to legend, when the Jews regained control of the temple
they found just enough undefiled oil
to keep the lampstand in the Temple burning
for a single day.
But by some miracle,
that oil burned for 8 days.

The next year, the Jews set aside those same eight days for a feast,
to remember the miracle of the oil.
And their leaders determined that every year at that season
there should be set aside eight days of joy and gladness
to mark the rededication.

That's what Jesus was there to celebrate that day.
Out of the awful devastation of the Jewish community,
came a miracle that Jews still celebrate 2,200 years later.
Not the vilest of persecution and suffering
could snatch God's people out of God's hand.

Not then.
And not now.
Not on a Good Friday in roughly the year 33 AD.
Not through two millennia of struggle and persecution.
Not through pain that seems unendurable.
Not on a Tuesday in April of 1999.
And not on a Tuesday in May of 2019.
Not ever.

Sometimes, communities suffer –
not because God wills it,
but because life happens,
and sometimes life hurts.
Sometimes individuals suffer –
not because God wills it,
because life happens,
and sometimes life hurts.
Sometimes we are all called on
to walk through the valley of the shadow of death.
Often as not, it's a place we don't want to go.
And if we've been there once,

we definitely don't want to go back there.

But we have a good shepherd,
and that shepherd has promised us
green pastures and still waters await us
if we follow him.

We must not imagine that our lives will be free from suffering.
We must not imagine that there won't be more pain,
more shootings,
more violence,
more Columbines,
more abominations of desolation.
But we trust that in God
we will find strength, courage and solace enough
to sustain us
until that time
when we, too, become victors over death.
Until that day when hunger and thirst will be no more,
and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes,
and we will be filled with joy and thanksgiving
greater than any suffering.

Listen.
Listen for your shepherd calling you.
Listen, and give thanks,
that even in the midst of desolation
his goodness and mercy surround you,
and you will dwell in his house forever.
Amen.