

"Tombstone For Sale"

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Today is the day death wears sneakers.

I saw it with my own two eyes!

You see the senior pastor at Gloria Dei LC (KC, MO) had a flair for the dramatic,

He would start every Easter service by having someone dress up like the grim reaper

Complete with a sickle, black robes and black hood

The specter stood facing the congregation – scowling during the prelude

And each Easter service would begin with the pastor coming forward in his white robes

to confront this dark figure with the words, Christ is risen.

And the people would shout out – HE IS RISEN INDEED

They would repeat it – each time it was said, the one dressed in the black robe would cower, shudder, and shy away, until after the third iteration of HE IS RISEN INDEED – the grim reaper dropped his sickle and ran!

Down the aisle – out the door of the sanctuary, out the doors of the church, across the parking lot, through the adjoining field – he's probably still running today!

Since I was the intern, I got a chance to meet the 'grim reaper' downstairs at the Easter pancake breakfast. It was a parishioner named Doug. It was then that I noticed what enabled the grim reaper to make such a quick getaway.

Under the robes Doug was dressed for Easter service in a fine suit. He had on shirt and tie and jacket, along with black dress pants and black dress socks, but on his feet were not black Bostonian penny loafers, not black wingtips, but black converse sneakers!

This morning we celebrate what scripture declares: that death and tears and sighing, shall flee away.

For we have an Easter God in a good Friday world.

We too often know what it's like to live in a good Friday world, don't we?

I think of Robert Frost's poem, "I know how the flowers felt." It reflects our experience of being bruised and broken by life. He wrote,

The rain to the wind said
You push and I'll pelt
They so smote the garden bed
That the flowers actually knelt
And lay lodged, though not dead
I know how the flowers felt.

We live in a Good Friday world

We know how the flowers felt.

Another suicide bombing in Iraq

More troops needed in Afghanistan

Another sleepless night in our home

We live in a Good Friday world.

Another headline telling of economic gloom and doom

Another argument out of control
Another expression of love postponed
We live in a Good Friday world

Another child left behind in school

Another youth lost to drugs or alcohol
Another marriage ends in an uproar
Another diagnosis brings us to silence
We live in a Good Friday world
Another child goes to bed hungry

Another loss of innocence via the internet

Another heart is broken in love's wake
Another shooting rampage claims innocent lives
Another nail is driven

On good Friday - All hope died - - - or so it seemed.
For Jesus' friends placed his body in the tomb
His teachings came to an end
Their aspirations for him came to an end
It seemed all goodness and light had withdrawn from this blue-green-globe

Recently while walking with our children

our daughter discovered the crocuses in the neighbor's yard
She loves the crocuses – she's seen pictures of them in books
She runs with excitement toward them – papa come look at the crocuses – they're purple with orange in
the middle
She lovingly touches their petals
As we bent down to look at some, she pointed out one or two that were laying on the ground
She tried to make them stand, but they wouldn't...
She turned to me, put her finger to her lips:
Sh!! They're sleeping.
I didn't have the heart to tell her they weren't sleeping.
Their stems broken - they- were not going to be revived.

The reality of our lives brings pain and misfortune and mistakes made and opportunities squandered

But God has a plan for putting death on the run.
God has a plan for restoring that which is broken within us.
God has a plan for wholeness and healing and peace.
The good news is WE HAVE AN EASTER GOD IN A GOOD FRIDAY WORLD

-"What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the creator calls a butterfly."
Jesus said it this way, "Now he is God not of the dead but of the living."
The angel said it this way:

Why do you seek the living among the dead? He has been raised – he is going ahead of you to Galilee – there you will see him.

Nature sometimes reflects the miracle of resurrection power that God released in Jesus –

Take for example, January 2002, a massive wet weather system moved into Central Mexico with unusually cold temperatures in the low 20's, causing an unprecedented death of Monarch butterflies which migrate to Mexico from Canada and the US each winter. Tens of millions of monarch butterflies died in catastrophic, unprecedented proportions. The entomologists who gathered there to estimate the death toll found gray carpeted acres of decaying wings. In order to measure the depth of the dead, they reached down through the decaying monarch layers of butterflies, and at about eight inches down, they discovered another layer, a layer of living monarchs which had been protected from the freezing rains by the ones that had died. Just enough survived over time to restore the species to life.

Buried beneath layers of death was hope for survival and a future for the species.

God reaches through the layers of death of this passion week, through the betrayal by Jesus' friends, the brutality of the crucifixion, and the air tight tomb and guard of soldiers, through all of it to bring about resurrection – an altogether new creation.

I'm amazed what can be sold or found today on e-bay or craigslist or whatever internet venue you choose. You can find practically anything if you have enough patience to search for it. It's a wonder anyone uses the classified ads any more to sell items.

Well, I know some do – because of an eye-catching ad in a Milwaukee, Wisconsin, newspaper's classified section. Big, bold letters advertised "Used Tombstone. " Who would think? Was it a practical joke? A typo? The ad's text read as follows: "Used tombstone for sale. Real bargain for someone named 'Homer.' Only one left. Call now for more information."

The truth is, my friends, because of the resurrection - there is a tombstone for sale,

The stone had been rolled away – there was no need for a grave to be marked with Jesus' name

No, the Father had bigger and better plans for Jesus.

Like the empty chrysalis, he had outgrown his tomb...The risen one had people to see and things to do. by God's grace and power, he was moving forward...

And here's the thing, as Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us: Every time Jesus came to his friends they became stronger, wiser, kinder, more daring. Every time he came to them, they became more like him.

So to with you.

The encounter with the living Christ makes you stronger and wiser, and kinder and more daring.

What cinches the resurrection for us, is not what happened in the tomb. What happened in the tomb was entirely between Jesus and God. For the rest of us, Easter began the moment the two Mary's fell at Jesus feet and took hold of them worshipping. That is where the miracle happened and goes on happening -- not in the tomb but in the encounter with the living Lord. In the encounter here with the touch and taste of bread. In the melodies bursting forth from our hearts and lips, in the fellowship of this community of believers who have been transformed...

So go ahead – hop on e-bay or craigslist or wherever, and put that tombstone for sale!

and while you're at it,

auction off some other things as well, like:

heartache, bitterness, grief, and self-pity –

rid yourself of all of them - you won't be needing them in His presence.

And now to Him who is able to accomplish abundantly beyond all we can ask or imagine, to Him be glory, now and forever. Amen.