

SERMON 931

Easter Wednesday

April 8, 2015

992nd Week as Priest

819th Week at St Dunstan's

84th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

THE NEED FOR HOPE

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.

Two of the disciples had given up all hope. After the death of Jesus, on the first day of the week, they decided to leave Jerusalem and walk the seven miles to a village called Emmaus. Along the way, Jesus encountered them, but they did not recognize him. They were consumed with sadness and they told him what had happened in recent days. Jesus of Nazareth had been crucified. One said, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

They told of the astonishing news from several women that they had seen the Risen Lord, but the men did not believe, for they had not seen him for themselves, and they thought it an "idle tale."

They had given up all hope that Jesus was the Messiah, and now that he was dead their work was over, and their dreams for themselves and their people were destroyed.

In one of his Dark Sonnets, the poet-priest Gerard Manley Hopkins writes of this hopelessness, this dark despair:

I WAKE and feel the fell of dark, not day.
What hours, O what black hours we have spent
This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!
And more must, in yet longer light's delay.
With witness I speak this. But where I say
Hours I mean years, mean life. And my lament
Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent
To dearest him that lives alas! away.

The Church Fathers called this dread, this giving up of all hope, *Acedia*, and considered it one of the deadly sins, a noonday demon. A bestseller from about five years ago by Kathleen Norris, *Acedia and Me*, spoke of her decades of struggle with marriage, faith, and depression. A Trappist monk wrote, "The vice of noninvolvement is said to be endemic in the Western world. The acediac is a person without commitment, who lives in a world characterized by mobility, passive entertainment, self-indulgence, and the effective denial of the validity of any

external claim." We are all susceptible to a weariness "of this need to live twenty-four hours every day" but we also, in the course of living, experience productive and highly optimistic times. Nearly everyone's life is a mixture of ups and downs.

But some people experience depression and despair that are deeper than most of us can imagine. The Emmaus disciples were like this; they were escaping the tragedy, giving up, giving up all hope for the future. It is hard to imagine that either of them would have ever recovered had it not been for the intervention of the Risen One himself.

Lindsey Smith, a student member here at St. Dunstan's for the last seven years, took her own life on Holy Saturday. Between the darkness of Good Friday and the heavy waiting hours until Easter Morning, she could not endure, she could not continue, she lost hope. And we were not there. Lindsey was present at Welcome Night back in August, and she seemed happy and engaged in the life of St. Dunstan's. She was confirmed by Bishop Kee in the spring along with eight others. But things happened, and she fell away, and she fell out of place, and she fell deeper and deeper into darkness and despair. She was working on a master's degree in Social

Work online from the University of Alabama, and staffing at a Rape Crisis Center. She had appeared here a couple of times since the beginning of the new year, but she didn't stay. I feel regret and deep sadness that I didn't do or say something. And I know that others do as well. In my rational mind I know that her death was not my fault, not our fault, but we still feel disappointed in ourselves and regret for things done and left undone. And of course, Lindsey took her own life (in her parents' home, with her father's pistol, on her father's birthday.) And she left no note, no message, nothing.

Lindsey is one of 30,000 Americans who commit suicide each year. The U.S. Surgeon General reports that more Americans die from suicide than from homicide, and 500,000 people per year need emergency room treatment because of attempted suicide. And many who commit suicide suffer from mental illness. The CDC reports that about 9% of American adults suffer from some form of depression.

The Episcopal Church's last General Convention passed a resolution calling for the church to "minister more appropriately to those ... especially at risk of suicide as well as those ... impacted by the suicide of others." The resolution also urged "all levels of the Episcopal Church"

to "accord high priority to the prevention of suicide in prayers and programming." "In the past, suicide was equated with homicide," said Robert M. Watson, a retired Episcopal priest who helped draft the Episcopal resolution. "We know that people who attempt suicide need support and therapy, not condemnation."

Lindsey's death calls us all to a closer examination of our selves, our souls and bodies, and to those things which we have done and left undone. I don't have any answers, but I do have hope that we can pay closer attention to the needs of others—not to fix them, but to be present in their suffering, somehow showing them the Risen Lord, in word and deed, and in the breaking of the bread. **AMEN.**