

From Rubble to Resurrection Easter, 2014

John 20:1-18

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Their world had been absolutely shattered. They had allowed themselves to dream too big, and now it had turned into a nightmare. They had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah and they had given him their all. Only hours ago Peter had proclaimed, "I will follow you to the death!"

But now, Peter was not to be found. Nor, for that matter, were any of the other disciples. When Jesus was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane they all fled into hiding, afraid for their own lives. Peter, at least, had followed Jesus to the high priest's house, but it was there that he denied even knowing Jesus—three times, just as Jesus had said he would. When Peter heard the rooster crow, he too vanished, the delusion of his bravado and courage completely destroyed.

It is astonishing how quickly life can be reduced to a pile of rubble. A single moment in time can cause life to come tumbling down around us.

Her life had been one hardship after another. Her parents had divorced when she was in junior high school. She wasn't able to go to college, even though she was a bright girl. Her mother couldn't afford to send her. She had taken a dead end job in the small town where she lived. Then she met a fellow she really liked. He was right for her. They got married and had two children. Then one day she was driving home and got hit broadside by a driver who didn't see her coming. She was seriously injured. One of the babies was killed. The other was in intensive care when I first saw her. She was only two years old at the time. I leaned over her crib and whispered in her ear, "Tanisha, I'm a friend of God's and I've come to tell you God loves you."

He sat in my office with his head in his hands. "Things aren't going well at home," he said. "My wife and I just aren't getting along. I'm not sure I even love her anymore. We've tried to make a go of it, but it just isn't working. I'm ready to throw in the towel. I just don't how tell her." I asked him if they had tried counseling. "Yes. We've been going to someone for two years. It hasn't helped. I think it's over."

She and her family were so proud when she graduated from college. Her whole life was ahead of her. Her prospects were bright. But two years later, she

still had not been able to land a job in the field for which she had trained. She had settled for a lot less than she had hoped for. She was still in an entry-level job and she didn't know how she would ever get beyond where she was. She hardly believed in herself anymore. What had happened? Had she been chasing an impossible dream?

It was pretty tough for him to come home that night and tell his wife and kids that he had been let go from his job. The company had been bought out. The new conglomerate was downsizing. They didn't need him anymore. "Can you imagine it," he said, "15 years right down the tubes. I can't believe it. Loyalty doesn't count for anything anymore. I was even one of their top producers. What am I going to do now?"

She was just a kid. She was in the youth group in a church I served a long time ago. She called saying she needed to talk. When I met her at the office she spilled her awful secret. "I'm pregnant, and I'm afraid to tell my dad." I didn't blame her. Her mother had left a long time ago. Her dad was a pretty hard, unforgiving guy. She was afraid of what he would do to her when he found out. "Would you go with me when I tell him?" she asked. I was there when she broke the news. The only thing I knew to say to him was that she was his daughter and there was never a time she needed him more than right now. Now was his chance to show her what kind of a father he wanted to be for her.

Rubble. It comes in all shapes and sizes. It's got your name on it. It's got my name on it. None of us are immune. The secret is not how to escape it, but how to overcome it.

Over the past few decades, a number of terrible events have shaken America to its foundations. September 11 was the worst one of them, but there have been many others. I'm thinking back several years ago when the federal building in Oklahoma City was bombed. We watched this tragic drama unfold as scores of people were extracted from that terrible rubble. Sometime after the Oklahoma tragedy there came news from Jonesboro, Arkansas about the 13 and 11-year-old gunmen who took five lives in a senseless act. Two whole communities reduced to rubble in a matter of seconds. But out of these two dark tragedies there shone a light of hope. Both news anchors, and reporters in the field, commented on how these communities came together in the face of these tragedies. For those who could see behind the headlines, it was obvious that these communities responded the way they did because they were directed by a profound faith that enabled them to see beyond the rubble to resurrection. No amount of rubble was able to extinguish their resurrection faith.

And isn't this what Easter is all about? We have prettified Easter with bright colors and bunnies and candy and new clothes and spring festivals. But Easter does not take its meaning from any of these things. It takes its meaning from the brutal fact that when the world had done its worst to the Son of God,

God had the last word. And that word is Resurrection, new life. Life overcoming death. Goodness overwhelming evil. The power of God overturning the power of this world. The empty tomb of Easter is God's own promise that he has the power to take us from rubble to resurrection.

The great artist, Rembrandt, is known for his unique style. He made the backgrounds in his paintings very dark in order to focus attention more sharply on the subject of his paintings. And so you have a night in dark armor against a darker background, but his face is illumined brightly by the light Rembrandt casts upon it. Our eyes are drawn past the darkness to the light so there can be no mistake about what the artist wanted us to see.

The resurrection is the jewel that God places in the dark setting of our rubble-filled lives so there can be no mistake about his clear message to us. Jesus is the one who delivered that message: "In this world you will have trouble, but take courage, for I have overcome the world."

The resurrection is God's way of saying to you and to me that Jesus was right. He has overcome the world, and in him we can overcome it too. And here is where our joy in life is found: not in the absence of trouble, but in the power that God gives us to overcome trouble; and not in the easy life, but in the power that God gives us to live the abundant life.

Many of you here this morning know what rubble is all about. Life has thrown you some nasty curves. You struggle to keep your head above water. Anxiety and fear, depression and despair are all too frequent companions. It is to you that Jesus says, "Take courage, I have overcome the world." It is to you that God says, "This is my son. Believe in him, and you shall have abundant life in this world and life eternal in the world to come."

In Jerusalem, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is built over the place where Jesus was crucified and over the place where he was buried. In the 2nd century, when the Roman Empire was trying to stamp out the infant Christian movement, the Roman Emperor Hadrian came to the holy city and almost completely obliterated the Garden Tomb and the Place of the skull where Jesus had been laid. He reduced that sacred spot to rubble. Then he built a temple to the goddess Diana over the site, believing that he had erased it, and Christianity from history.

Two-hundred years later, the Emperor of Rome became a Christian. His name was Constantine and his mother, Helena, also became a Christian. Helena made her own pilgrimage to the holy land to discover what she could about the places where Jesus had been born, lived, died, and rose again. She built a church in Bethlehem over the cave where early traditions said Jesus was born. When she came to Jerusalem she asked the local people where Jesus had been crucified and buried. I can just imagine that they said, "Why right over there,

where the Temple to Diana marks spot.” The very thing Emperor Hadrian had sought to destroy, he had actually preserved. Helena had the Temple torn down, and Golgotha and the place of the tomb excavated. Then she built a church over the spot to preserve and protect it for generations of pilgrims yet to come.

Today, when you enter the door of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, there is a mosaic that orients you to what you will see. On the right up a flight of steep steps, there is the Chapel of the Cross marking the spot where Jesus hung on the cross. Directly ahead of you, is the stone of unction—a marble slab that marks the spot where the women prepared Jesus body for burial. On the left, in the main chamber of the church, there is an ornate shrine donated by one of the Russian Czars commemorating the place where the tomb is believed to have been located. The shrine is small and dark, made to resemble a tomb. Inside the inner chamber there is a marble slab representing where Jesus body was laid. Only a few people can enter at one time. I’ve had the privilege of standing there with each member of my family. It is a holy place. And though I’ve been there three times, the last time was different.

I had entered the shrine first, followed by Bonnie, our oldest daughter Sally, and our son Peter. At the very back of the chamber, right next to where I was standing, there was a woman crouched on the floor with her head resting on the marble slab. She was dressed all in black with a heavy veil completely covering her face. She was sobbing silently and praying fervently. She was a picture of abject grief and sorrow. She represented all the rubble you and I could ever know. She was undone. My heart reached out to her, and everything within me wanted to reach across cultural, gender, and language barriers to touch her and to say to her, “Woman why are you crying? Who are you looking for? It’s all right. He’s not here. He is risen. And he gives us courage in life and victory over death. He can turn your rubble into resurrection. Take courage. He’s not here, he is risen.