

Rev. Mary Elizabeth Hanchey
May 29, 2022

Mary, Lazarus, and Gun Violence
“Hope Summons the Future”

John 11:28-44

I wonder what you have come to church to hear today.

Do you feel as if the world has tilted on its axis?

Like we are on an elevator that just plummeted down many, many stories?

Like the foundations of the earth are shaking?

Or the foundations of our faith?

I'm thinking, of course, about the terror and grief in Uvalde, Texas. And also in Buffalo, New York, and in Laguna Woods, California.

This violence is both unbearable and ubiquitous. I'm not sure why we bother to say “never again” any more. We don't seem to have a way to keep the bodies out of the graves. We don't seem to have any power to stop this nonsense. One might feel hopeless.

“Can you give us some hope today?” our friends at Carol Woods asked me when I visited for lunch on Wednesday.

I wasn't sure that I could.

Perhaps, like me, your emotions have been a roller coaster of grief and rage and resolve and hopelessness.

This rollercoaster is perfectly reasonable. So many different things are true:

- America is alone among first world countries in our access to guns and our inability to curb gun violence.

- AND there is a war raging in Ukraine
- AND it has seemed like the world was breaking apart before
- AND we can still remember Auschwitz, and the War in the Middle East, and Vietnam, and Kent State, and the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and ration cards for gasoline, and the Branch Davidians. We remember apartheid and Gaza and Tienanmen Square. We remember Columbine and Sandy Hook, and hundreds of other rampages.
- AND the kind of violence we are seeing in mass shootings grabs our attention, but the drip drip drip of violence in our communities is also eroding life and liberty for those with whom we share zip codes
- AND some of us are so drowning in our own personal hell that we have little energy to give to other outrages.

My 17 year old texted me from church a few weeks ago. “Mom, she (the pastor) is listing all of the things that are bad and wrong in the world and I feel so overwhelmed. I hate this.” She lamented.

I told her that I was sure the pastor, who I think is a fabulous preacher, was going to make an exegetical turn and to just hang on. But it was all too much for her 17 year old brain and I get it.

I wonder how many of you feel that way right now.

“Can you give us some hope today?” you may be asking.

I’ve been reading Elie Wiesel this week. His reflections on life in this world and faith in God as a survivor of the Holocaust are compelling and haunting. The Nobel Lecture he gave in December 1986 was titled “Hope, Despair and Memory.”

I hope you read it this afternoon. You can find it easily online. Don’t settle for pithy quotes from it, because it is tangled and beautiful and no summary can do it justice. He performs an intricate dance with concepts that balance each other.

He dances with remembering and forgetting: we have a duty to remember and a need to forget, he says.

He dances with the past and the future: The opposite of the past is not the future, but the absence of future and the opposite of the future is not the past but the absence of past, he says.

He dances with despair and hope: Because I remember, I despair. Because I remember, I have the duty to reject despair, he says. I remember the killers, I remember the victims even as I struggle to invent a thousand and one reasons to hope.

He dances with the limits of our power and what it is that we must do: There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest, he says.

And this - the line to which I kept returning: HOPE SUMMONS THE FUTURE.

We do justice to the past by summoning the future. Our remembering and our protest become acts of hope that summon the future.

Our work is to summon the future.

To that group gathered at Carol Woods I asked: can you give me some hope today? What would you tell a congregation on Sunday?

"We have hope when there is something we can do. Hope is proactive. It comes from planting the seeds, not just knowing that we could plant seeds if we wanted to. Hope comes from planting them. It involves work." said Gates. That claim so poignantly coalesces with this idea that hope summons the future.

What is it that you must do? What future will we summon with our hope?

The gospel reading today, the telling of Lazarus's resurrection from John 11, is a hard one to preach on today.

It is a funeral scene. And this community of faithful Jews has gathered to perform all of the rites and rituals of mourning, but whatever power those rites and rituals have, they do not resurrect the body. And so the siblings cry out. Mary confronts Jesus: "If you had been here, my brother would not have

died. And Jesus grieves. He weeps, the text tells us. And so he raises Lazarus from the dead, and there is bodily resurrection and those sisters get their brother back.

I was pretty belligerent for a while. Really? Is this what we are doing this week?

I was already intrigued that we are hearing it again. I preached from this text on All Saints Sunday in November.

“There are no easy answers.

But there are promises.

- There is the promise that our grief will not prevail.
- That not even death will prevail.
- There is the promise of new life from the One who redeems us - “See, I am making all things new.”
- That our life in this world begins and ends in God, and that there is restoration in this world, and in what is to come.

I wonder how to hold these promises in the midst of all that we face. And I wonder what the unbinding of Lazarus has to do with restoration. I wonder whom we are called to unbind?”

That question: I wonder whom we are called to unbind? Let’s keep asking it.

Because we have hope when there is something that we can do.

As we weep over every single death of someone huddled in a grocery store, or a church, or a theater, or a school - Mary’s lament is ours: “If you had only been there.”

But to whom will we direct this cry? It’s ok to be angry at God.

And there is more.

As resurrection people, as followers of a risen Lord, we have agency to be the body of Christ in this world. And so what is it that you are called to do? What does “being there” look like for you?

And how might our lament be heaped upon the legislators who have the power to change gun laws?

“There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest,” says Wiesel. And so, we ask each other: How will your hope summon the future? Or perhaps, for what future are you working?

Wiesel’s speech ends with this: “A destruction only man can provoke, only man can prevent. Mankind must remember that peace is not God’s gift to his creatures, it is our gift to each other.”

So may it be.