

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
**305 EAST MAIN STREET**  
**DURHAM, NC 27701**  
**PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



**“The Path of Life”**  
**A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth**  
**Second Sunday of Easter (Year A)**  
**April 27, 2014**  
**John 20:19–31; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3–9**

---

On Easter Saturday of every year,  
my family, my Moravian family, gathers in God’s Acre,  
| the Moravian graveyard in Winston-Salem, to wash the gravestones  
of our family members there, to remember each of them,  
and to decorate their graves with flowers for the Easter sunrise service held  
early in the morning of Easter Sunday.

We have so many family members there that we have to use a map  
to locate some of them since they are arranged chronologically  
in groups the Moravians called choirs,  
with men buried separately from women,  
and with children and babies buried separately from parents.

We carry with us Comet cleanser, a tire brush to scrub the marble gravestones,  
a toothbrush to dislodge the pollen and dirt from the lettering,  
a bucket to fill with water from the pump to rinse the grime off,  
fresh flowers, and cut coat hanger stakes to secure the flowers in the ground.

I always tend the graves of my grandmother and my mother,  
who are buried close to one another in the newer section on the hill,  
close to the second gingko tree on the left.

Except this year, when I arrived at God’s Acre on that drizzly cold Saturday morning,  
I could not find either one of their graves because the church had

cut down every one of the beautiful ginkoes in the newer section,  
depriving me of my primary means of graveyard navigation.

"What? Who cuts down the only living things in a graveyard!" I muttered angrily  
as I spun in place, trying to get my bearings.

And I found myself having a panic attack right in the middle of the graveyard  
because I could not find the headstones of my beloved ones  
among the myriad identical marble squares dotting the grassy slope.

And I thought to myself, "Death is bad, certainly, but not knowing where is your  
loved one is even worse, to be sure!"

And I felt an ache for those families of Malaysian Airlines Flight 370 whose loved ones  
are still missing somewhere in the Indian Ocean,

and I felt a twinge for those families of the high school youth lost in that ferry wreck  
off the coast of South Korea,

and I felt a sympathetic connection to the disciples of Jesus on Easter evening,  
locked behind those closed doors in full-blown panic, probably,

dismayed over having lost Jesus to death,  
and doubly dismayed and puzzled having lost his body again  
to the empty tomb and to possible resurrection.

When my little world quit spinning, I did find my designated graves  
and breathed again in peace that all was right.

The bible verse engraved on my mother's simple square headstone is from Psalm 16,  
the last verse: "You show me the path of life.

In your presence there is fullness of joy;  
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11).

I never knew why my father chose this verse for her grave.

He never told me, and I always thought it was too personal to ask.

And so I am left to wonder why he found it fitting.

It's an unusual Psalm, Psalm 16: a psalm of confidence,  
that neither the place called the pit nor the place called Sheol  
will have the last claim upon our lives.

It is unusual, perhaps, because it voices assurance of the Lord's power,  
even in the midst of suffering;

both are allowed, and both are allowed simultaneously.

This is no confession of simplistic either/or faith:

either you're for me or you're against me;

either you're in or you're out.

This is a declaration of the complexity of both/and faith:

*both* fully aware that other loyalties, allegiances, and distractions easily

might pull one out of prescribed faith boundaries,

*and* at the same time, thankful that one's heart and soul rest secure under God's watch.

It allows for distress *and* joy, panic *and* peace simultaneously:

like a widow or widower lamenting the untimely loss of a spouse

while still holding fast to belief in the goodness of the Lord,

like a mother lamenting the failure of a marriage while still holding fast

to the hope of boundary lines of finances and custody arrangements

falling into pleasant places,

like a young immigrant family lamenting the specter of deportation,

while still holding fast to the affirmation that

with the Lord "at my right hand, I shall not be moved,"

like the loyal disciple, Thomas, initially mired in confusion

following the death and resurrection of Jesus,

yet still able to profess, "My Lord and my God."

We can lament loss and profess faith simultaneously, the Psalmist says,

and still be counted legitimately among the faithful.

That's incredible good news, as I see it.

Faith, itself, has pleasant, porous boundaries;

tombs have stones that can be rolled away;

and solid walls of fear have doors that can close and open.

We can hear the best, most stirring and triumphant sermon on Easter morning,

embellished by the sound of trumpets and the smell of lilies,

by the flowers in the cross, and the beautiful dresses of the little girls,  
and return home and take one look the newspaper or the TV newscast,  
and be "cast" immediately into the place the psalmist calls "the pit."

Whether the pit is literal or metaphorical, we do not know.

Biblically, the pit is the place where Joseph, the dreamer and favored son,  
was thrown by his jealous brothers

to render him powerless in their lives (Genesis 37: 22, 28).

The pit was the mud hole where city officials threw Jeremiah, the prophet,  
to render him voiceless when he was advising soldiers to retreat  
to Babylon rather than stand and defend a dying city.

The pit, according to Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann,

"means to deny a person all resources necessary for life."

(Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, p. 41)

The idiom is used in contemporary language when we say that "life is the pits,"  
which may encompass feelings of helplessness, powerlessness,  
abandonment, forgottenness, loneliness, guilt or shame.

Some time ago, when our family relocated for about the fourth time  
in a short span of years, displacing our children

and upsetting their schooling and friendships,

our elementary-aged daughter wrote and illustrated a booklet for school

entitled "Moving is the Pits." I could not have agreed with her more.

When we hear the horrible news that 300 high school youth

drowned on a sunken ferry off South Korea, that sting of death

acts quickly to numb our Easter resurrection hope.

When we read online the story about the kidnapping of the prosecutor's

father in Wake Forest that was orchestrated by a gang leader

imprisoned in Butner, those bindings of sin act quickly

to constrict our Easter proclivity to trust.

When we open our email to discover a string of accusations from

people we considered to be "friends" and feel singled out for slaughter,

the shine slips quickly from that Easter glory  
or sometimes has trouble even finding a foothold, as Thomas attests.  
Shel Silverstein uses a children's poem to speak of the primal fear  
that can paralyze even the most faithful of believers.  
It could be the poem of the early church ensconced in that upper room  
behind closed doors; it could be the poem of Thomas, slow to  
override the conviction that if it's too good to be true, it's probably not true.

***I Won't Hatch***

*Oh I'm a chickie who lives in an egg.  
But I will not hatch, I will not hatch.  
The hens they all cackle, the roosters all beg,  
But I will not hatch, I will not hatch.  
For I hear all the talk of pollution and war  
As the people all shout and the airplanes roar,  
So I'm staying in here where it's safe and it's warm,  
And I WILL NOT HATCH!*

(Shel Silverstein, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, "I Won't Hatch")

To the image of the pit, the psalmist amplifies with the word *Sheol*.

In ancient Hebrew, *Sheol* was considered to be a place of powerless,  
gray, shadowy existence, where one is removed from  
joy and discourse with God.

This psalm voices the reality, that the life of faith, even Easter faith,  
does not protect us from the pit or shelter us from *Sheol*.

But it does attest to the One whose abiding presence is in those most troubling places,  
especially in those most troubling places,  
and who brings us security – even there – and new-found path of life.

Psalm 16 reminds me of an oldie-goldie written by Eric Clapton called  
*In the Presence of the Lord*.

Clapton wrote the song in 1969, and Steve Winwood sang it  
when they were both members of a group called Blind Faith.

*In the Presence of the Lord*, I think, could be a modern rendering of Psalm 16:

*I have finally found a way to live, just like I never could before.  
I know that I don't have much to give, but I can open any door.  
Everybody knows the secret, everybody knows the score.  
I have finally found a way to live, in the presence of the Lord.*

*I have finally found a place to live, just like I never could before.  
And I know I don't have much to give, but soon I'll open any door.  
Everybody knows the secret, everybody knows the score.  
I have finally found a place to live, in the presence of the Lord.*

Clapton has not led a squeaky clean life, nor has his journey been an easy one.

At age nine, he learned that his aunt was really his mother,

and that he had been born out of wedlock when she was very young.

After that, he struggled to find security, confidence, and identity.

Over the years he struggled with addiction problems

with a string of failed relationships and poor choices and with the  
tragic death of his four-year-old son, Conor, who died in  
a fall from an apartment window.

Clapton says the turning point in his life came at a rock-bottom moment at

| a rehab treatment center in 1987.

"I was in complete despair," Clapton writes in his autobiography.

"In the privacy of my room, I begged for help.

I had no notion who I thought I was talking to;

I just knew that I had come to the end of my tether...  
and, getting down on my knees, I surrendered.

Within a few days I realized that... I had found a place to turn to,  
a place I'd always known was there but never really wanted or needed  
to believe in.

From that day until this, I have never failed to pray in the morning,  
on my knees, asking for help, and at night, to express gratitude for my life."  
(John Powel. *Christianity Today*, "Eric Clapton, In the Presence of the Lord," April 9, 2008)

What I think Clapton is describing, and what I think the psalmist is attesting to,  
is that God is a place of refuge right in the midst of present dire circumstances.

Our doors of hope may be locked out of fear, but the risen Christ  
comes to us and is present with us in the midst of our chaos,  
breathing new Spirit into us,  
and offering us a newfound peace that passes understanding.

Our GPS of life may be temporarily disabled, throwing us into a hissy-fit  
and a sense of becoming unmoored, but the risen Christ  
comes to us and is present with u, in the midst of our lostness  
breathing a new Spirit of commission into us,  
empowering us to continue the journey with newfound purpose.

Our dark night of the soul might blind us to faith in the resurrection of the body  
and cast us into doubt and disbelief, like Thomas,  
but the risen Christ comes to us and is present with us,  
in the midst of our unseeing, offering new life  
and light that shines even in the darkness.

Our reality may lie somewhere between the pit and Sheol,  
between Scylla and Charybdis, between a rock and a hard place,  
between panic and anger, between despair and doubt,  
but Jesus is the way; Jesus is the path of life. Jesus' constant  
resurrection presence makes joy and hope possible,  
even in the midst of pain and loss.

Third century theologian, Origen of Alexander, said,  
"Believing in Jesus' resurrection means wanting to follow him."

(William Placher, *Jesus the Christ*, p. 168)

I interpret that to mean that Jesus' resurrection takes a little bit of curiosity  
and a great deal of courage to fight the impulse to immobilize,  
and instead, to walk out of our closed doors and follow  
the risen Christ, hopefully, maybe by advocating for the least of these,  
even as we lament, perhaps, the demise of the Voting Rights Act  
and Affirmative Action.

It means wanting to follow the risen Christ, like looking for Where's Waldo,  
in compassionately seeking ways to provide health care for all people,  
even as we lament, perhaps, that NC has opted  
out of the federal Medicaid funding for hundreds of low-income,  
uninsured people.

It means wanting to follow the risen Christ, hopefully,  
in advocating justly for high quality childcare  
for our littlest ones, even as the state continues to chip away at  
childcare subsidies for our pre-schoolers.

Contemporary theologian Daniel Migliore says this of our hope in the risen Christ:  
"Christians learn the meaning of hope in the grace of God  
only in *the practice of discipleship*.

That practice includes proclaiming the gospel and sharing with others  
the forgiveness, peace, reconciliation, liberation and hope  
that are the gifts of God....

As the church waits and prays, it also acts.

Christian Hope *does not immobilize people*, but makes them *eager to get to work*.

It is not escapist hope, but creative hope.

It encourages anticipatory realizations of God's new world of justice and peace."

(Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p. 249)

In other words, disciples: don't be afraid to HATCH!

Amen.