

Tragedy after Easter – Easter after the Tragedy

Colleagues,

Darlene Grega, ELCA pastor and member of the pastoral staff at the Valparaiso University chapel, was found lifeless in her home a fortnight ago, having apparently died by her own hand. Pastor Grega attended V.U. in earlier years, graduating with a degree in deaconess ministry. Fred Niedner, V.U. theology professor, was the Gospel-proclaimer at her memorial service last Saturday. Here's what he proclaimed.

Weeping with them that weep, but not without hope,
Ed Schroeder

“Go in Peace. . .Thanks be to God!”

Sermon at the Memorial Service for the Rev. Darlene Grega

Valparaiso University, 17 April 2010

Revelation 5:11-14

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, “To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down

and worshiped.

John 21:1-19

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish.

That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.

Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the

dead.

I believe I have heard the word “bewildered” more often in the last ten days than in the previous ten years combined. It’s the perfect word for where we’ve been as a community since April 7th. We’ve been thrust into the wild, the wilderness. Our thoughts, if not our bodies, have wandered about lost. We would give anything to go back, to have things again the way they were on Easter Sunday, but we cannot. We’ve struggled to go forward, one footstep at a time. Even to do that, we have needed every liturgy, every Bible reading, every prayer, every song and hymn, every homily, every greeting of peace that has happened among us. Thank goodness we had practiced these things ahead of time, so they were ready for us during this time.

Some of you here today gathered for Pastor Darlene’s funeral in Cleveland on Tuesday, so you have passed some different markers in the wilderness than the rest of us have seen. None of us, however, has remained in precisely the same place of stunned silence as when we first heard the news, but we’re still bewildered. So once more today, we gather to sing, to remember, to give thanks, to comfort one another with holy words and promises, and to take our turn at handing a beloved sister back to the God who gave her to us as a companion on our pilgrimage through life.

Because Darlene’s life intersected with each of ours at a different time or in a somewhat different way, each of us brings with us today a different offering, a unique set of memories, stories, and thankfulness to throw up before God in gratitude. I met Darlene here, on this campus, when she was a Deaconess student and I was the youngster in the Theology Department. I got out my old grade book last week and I found her-in “Jesus & the Gospels,” spring semester of 1976. She got an “A.” I looked

at the rest of the names, most of which I remember. One name near the end of the alphabet stopped me in my tracks. Darlene isn't the first person in that class roster whom I have helped to bury. Three years ago I did a funeral for one of the others, a man who had stayed around here after graduating and lived out his life in Valparaiso, and who had no church or pastor to bury him. His old theology teacher would do.

As I pondered his story for a moment, juxtaposed now with Darlene's, I learned something important. I instinctively remembered Roger and all that his life had meant without being tempted to filter it all through the tiny prism of the way he had died. And I recognized that I have habitually done just that when recalling the stories of those who have taken their own lives. Perhaps we try so hard to figure out how it happened, and what may have led to this tragic outcome, that we somehow shape our whole remembrance into a story that points to this one, last, fearful thing-suicide.

One thing we're surely here to do today, I believe, is to put the lie to that way of storytelling. If there is a single point of reference through which to filter everything in Darlene's story, it would not be at the end, but at the beginning, in the waters of her baptism, on the day her parents took her to be buried with Christ by baptism into his death, so that from that day on, and forevermore, she could live the new life of Christ Jesus himself.

And live that life she did. I can't tell you any childhood stories, or high school stories, but Darlene's mom is here today, and she remembers. At least one high school classmate is here today, and maybe later, around those tables in the narthex, Keith will tell a story or two. There are Lutheran Deaconesses here today who remember and give thanks for a bright, energetic friend and college classmate. She was like some of you current

students, the ones we still call “Chapel rats.” On a Facebook tribute page, a fellow Deaconess remembers how, during their student years, she would always make sure to walk to class with Darlene on days when they had an exam. Along the way, she would ask, “Darlene, what do you think were the most important points in this unit?” Darlene would list some things, and sure enough, those were always on the test. “I’m not sure I’d have made it without her,” said the classmate.

Back when Huegli Hall was Deaconess Hall and it was full of Deaconess students, residents celebrated a distinctively Lutheran kind of Halloween. Since Halloween and Reformation Day coincide, Deac students sometimes dressed up as Reformation era characters in full costume. Martin and Katie Luther would come to the party, along with Philip Melanchthon and sometimes Pope Leo X. I have no photograph to prove this, but I hold in my mind a picture of Darlene dressed up as John Tetzel and selling indulgences just inside the entryway.

On Easter Sunday this year, Darlene gleefully reminded my older son how she babysat him once upon a time. She loved children, and she loved young people, so she went into campus ministry and she longed to be a mom. After so much trying, God answered her prayers, and Nathan was born—her gift from God, her great joy.

And eventually [fast forward!] she came here, to be one of our pastors. It was less than two years ago, but half the students on this campus have no memory of this place without her, until now. I have heard multiple times in these past days how Darlene knew students’ names and remembered details of their lives, sometimes after meeting them only once. She had the gift of knowing and remembering, of making lasting connections after even brief encounters. In this, she was following her calling as Christ’s servant in the ministry of gathering, including, and holding others close.

And now friends, I'm going to start using some of our Bible stories to help us understand what we have witnessed in the life of our sister, beginning with the gospel lesson in John 21 that I read a few minutes ago. "Go back out again," Jesus told the tired fishermen who'd worked all night and had nothing to show for it. Go back out into the deep, and let down the nets. That is the mission of those who listen to Christ and follow along as he leads, for it's down in the depths where God always goes seeking and finding, so that's where God sends us.

I'm not sticking with one text today, so I'll tell you Matthew's gospel has another way to teach about going into the deep. In that gospel, Jesus tells Peter, the fisherman who has just confessed him the Christ, the son of the living God, "Yes, dear friend, you got it. Indeed, just seeing that is a gift. And here's another gift-I give you the power to forgive sins. Now, here's what you do with this gift. Go straight to hell, Peter. I'm telling you, they can't keep you out. The gates of hell cannot stand up to your assault!"

So Peter, and Darlene like him, went straight to hell, to where God is not. . .into the circles where some say God would never go, where Jesus would never be found. Darlene preached and presided here in this big, beautiful place, and I think she even enjoyed it sometimes. But her love, her ministry, and her heart were mostly in the circles and communities, and among the loners and lost sheep, who don't very often find there way into this place. Dressed in the Christ-clothes of her baptism, she embodied Christ in places where children of God without such clothes to wear dwelt in isolation, exile, or in places we care so little about we don't see them, or even have names for them. She was Christ for them, God's agent. Like Christ himself, and by his grace, Darlene unhelled hell. And some of you know the stories.

But sadly, those weren't the only visits Darlene made to hell. There were days and nights she sometimes hinted at when the darkness threatened to envelop her despite the light of the Christ-clothes she wore, and despite all the good things in her life. And finally, last week, there was that last brush with the abyss. And we've been heartbroken ever since.

As Pastor Wetzstein reminded us so clearly and carefully in this place last Sunday, Darlene joined us at the great Last Supper on Maundy Thursday, went with us to Gethsemane and later to the cross on Good Friday. On Easter Sunday she celebrated the Eucharist here and she led us in proclaiming the mystery of our faith: "Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again."

Only three days later, she slipped into the darkness from which we cannot bring her back. What can this mean? How do we hold these things together and not let darkness and death be the victors in this story? How can this happen to people who help the rest of us hang on?

This kind of darkness is no stranger in the church, among God's people, nor has it ever been. Martin Luther, all too familiar himself with dark nights of the soul, wrote often, and with obvious compassion, about something similar that happened in his day. It seems that a certain Bishop Krause, advisor to a Cardinal in Halle, someone much loved and trusted among Luther's friends and colleagues, took his own life in 1527 after being reprimanded by church authorities for having done things in sympathy with the reformers. That he took his life on All Saints Day seems to have compounded the community's grief. Later, one of Bishop Krause's confessors revealed that the broken pastor had come to think that even Christ himself had nothing to say of him but judgment and criticism. When Luther preached about this, he said, "This is the tragedy of our human condition, that we

fall so far we can no longer see or hear the true God, and we imagine the condemning God is the only God. And then, the God we imagine becomes the God we get.”

But this is not the true and only God, Luther continued. In Jesus Christ, the true God breaks into even that despair. In the one who cries out, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” God joins those whom darkness swallows, and as Luther so often preached, in so doing Christ unhelled hell forever. There is no place that any one of us could ever end up, no depth to which we might ever sink, but that even there, he is Lord for us. Even there, he says, “Come with me.”

That, dear friends, is the promise of your baptism, the promise of the God revealed to us on the cross outside Jerusalem. It’s been put so many ways over the centuries, beginning with Paul’s saying that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. I find myself saying it over and over like I said it here on Easter Sunday, “I believe that I cannot believe. My own reason and strength always fail me. But the Holy Spirit never, ever gives up. I may lose my grip. No, I WILL lose my grip. But God never lets go.” That is the gospel.

With that promise we comfort ourselves in the face of our sister’s death. She lost her grip, but the God who in Christ ceaselessly roams hell looking for lost ones did not. When Darlene fell, his ruined, crucified hands were there to catch her. And he said, “Dear sister, come with me.” No matter the time or circumstances of your death, he’ll be there again-waiting, and ready.

In the mean time, we have work to do. Here in space and time, we had our last meal, our last breakfast on the seashore, with Christ and his servant Darlene back on Easter Sunday. Now there’s work to do. “Go back out, and cast the nets again,” says

Jesus. And so we shall. We'll go out together, never alone, and we go out with a remarkable promise. The truth is, I think, that we don't so much go out as the fishermen and fisherwomen and fisherchildren, but we go as the net. We go as a community of crucified people hanging onto each other for dear life as God hauls us as a group through the deep. By the way, did you ever look closely at a net, and notice that it's nothing more than a countless host of crosses, all tied together? That's who we are, all of us together, forever connected. That's what our lives look like as we're hauled through the deep with the promise that the net will not break, no matter what.

Yes, we have work to do. Let me tell you one more story from the time of Darlene's ministry among us. Many of you know it, or versions of it, because she loved to tell it and told it often. During the first-ever Sunday Eucharist of her ministry here, as she helped to distribute communion at one of the railings up there in the chancel, Darlene felt a button or snap give way and her skirt fell to the floor around her feet and beneath her alb just as she gave the cup to a woman who knelt there. When the woman had sipped from the cup and returned it to Darlene's hands, the woman whispered, "What do I do now?" What Darlene didn't know was that this woman had never worshiped here before and simply didn't know what to do next-stand up, stay kneeling, leave this way, that way? But for the moment Darlene was only thinking about her skirt now circling her feet, so she whispered to the woman, "Pick up my skirt."

This did not compute. The woman looked blankly at Darlene as if she had spoken in tongues, got up, and left the railing. With that, Darlene made eye-contact with the next person in line, who was by chance Thanne Wangerin, who'd been at that railing countless times and knew exactly what to do. Darlene stepped out of her circled skirt. Thanne sipped from the cup, scooped the skirt up under her arm, and went on her way rejoicing.

I know there's another whole sermon lingering in that story, because that, friends, from this vantage point, is a moment straight out of another gospel, Mark's gospel, the gospel with the story of the guy who loses his clothes in Gethsemane but shows up later, at the empty tomb, in, yes, a white alb, to witness to Christ's resurrection. I'll not preach that second sermon. Instead, we're going to live it.

We've picked up the grave-clothes our sister left behind, and like her, we all have our Christ clothes to wear while we greet and comfort one another as we stand here at the empty tomb to share the promise of Christ's resurrection, and ours. And then, we're off. Off to where?

As usual, at the end of this service, we'll hear the familiar line, "Go in peace. Serve the Lord," and we'll all respond, "Thanks be to God." Just for today, I invite you to imagine it this way, "Go in peace, but go straight to hell. They can't keep you out."

We'll say together, "Thanks be to God," and we'll go on our way, rejoicing through our tears.

Frederick Niedner

Chapel of the Resurrection, Valparaiso, IN

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