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Sermon for The Great Vigil of Easter 2022

Have you ever been to an Irish wake?

If you have, then you know that an Irish wake is a time meant for storytelling, the beloved pastime of the Irish people. Family and friends gather to tell stories about their now deceased loved one. “Do you recall that one time when ...?” begin the stories. “Remember when ...” “There was that time when ...” and round and round the stories go. They sort of spiraling upward, the details like brush strokes that paint a portrait of the deceased in brilliant colors and light and shadows.

Almost 20 years ago, a friend and college classmate of my now-husband, tragically died in a car accident driving on icy backroads one cold late November night in Wisconsin. I knew Andrew, my husband’s friend. We’d spent time together in groups, going to movies, bars, parties as people in their early 20s do. But I didn’t know him well.

The night before his funeral, a gathering was held in his family’s church. Andrew’s body was there with us in his casket, a simple pine box that his uncles had constructed for him that week. A cup of markers sat on a table next to the casket for guests to write messages or prayers for Andrew or to simply sign their names to say that they were there. For hours, we told stories. Well into the night, family members and friends would stand up and tell a story about that one time when. Some read poems that reminded them of Andrew. Some sang and played songs that they knew he loved. Every one of us was in tears.

As the early evening turned into night, a picture of Andrew began to form in my mind. I learned that he was the kind of person beloved by both jocks and nerds. An adept soccer player and skilled musician. His humor was dry but also ridiculously silly. He fiercely loved his friends and family alike. His four younger brothers saw him as everything they wanted to be.

No one called it a wake, but I, Meghan Murphy, knew exactly what we were doing.

Tonight, we do something, not exactly the same, but similar: We tell stories. But the stories, or rather, the story we share with one another is not about someone we all once knew. The story we tell is about the God who was and is and is to come. And each detail of the story that emerges, we recall just how our God is.

We speak of the Creator who said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. We tell of the God who separated the light from the darkness and the land from the sea, and called forth every living thing, even us, human beings made in God’s likeness.

We recall how we turned away from God, rejecting our responsibility to care and tend to all of creation, land and sea and one another, with love and stewardship, and how a torrent of rain flooded the whole of earth to alert us to what we had done.

We tell of the pain of loss, of abandonment, of loneliness, experiences that unite all of us. We tell of the suffering of a people enslaved and oppressed by a tyrannical ruler.

We remember the great Exodus of God's people from Egypt, liberated under the leadership of Moses, that reluctant but devoted servant of God who grappled constantly with the authority with which God had entrusted him. "What are you crying to me for?" God says, "Go and lead my people." And Moses did, separating the Red Sea into safe passage for the Israelites. Freedom for God's people. Against all odds.

We speak of dry bones scattered across a valley, people for whom all hope was lost. Slain and slaughtered, not a chance of life. We tell of how God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel and put flesh and sinew on those bones and breathed into them life. Life against all odds.

We tell of a people gathered by God. We speak of divine promise. We speak of covenant. God's assurance to us that we will be restored and rejoice in exultation to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever.

We tell a story tonight. A pretty good one, I must say.

I speak to you tonight in the midst of this story. There is more to come.

I don't just mean tonight, though be assured there will be more joyful storytelling with words and water and smoke and oil and music. For even when we have made a great noise at the proclamation of resurrection and sung our praises to the God who creates, redeems and sustains us, the story will not have ended.

It does not end tonight. It does not end tomorrow. It does not end even after Eastertide, some 50 days from now.

Our story goes on. It is ancient and it is new.

Because this story is your story.

This story of loss and redemption. Of suffering and transformation. Of oppression and liberation. Of creation and recreation. This story belongs to you. Each and every one of you. This story belongs *in* you.

So let your lives keep telling the story of the God whose light overcomes all darkness, the God who so loved the world that he walked among us and told us the story of salvation, the story of unrelenting *love* that overcomes even death.