

Maria Maguire
Young Priest Initiative (YPI) Intern at Grace

July 19, 2020
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 44:6-8
Psalm 86: 11-17
Romans 8: 12-25
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Good morning, Grace! As many of you know, I am a summer intern here at Grace for 8 weeks. This is my last sermon and next Sunday will be my last Sunday. And sadly, no, you cannot kidnap me to stay longer, as some of you have suggested, and no, I am not eager to dash out the door, as some of you have joked.

This morning I would like to share a piece of my story with you, so that you can better understand the healing, life-giving role you have played in my life. It is fair to say that my time at Grace has been a mountain-top experience. A mountain-top experience: one of those times when you feel you are on top of the world, and you can see the valley where you've come from below. A beautiful vista stretches beyond and you sigh a peaceful thank you. A bit strange to have a mountain-top experience during a pandemic, but, you know, God works in strange ways.

A couple of years ago, I was walking through the darkest valley of my life thus far. Over the course of just three months, the tectonic plates of my life's terrain shifted. It was a life-quake—an earthquake, but in my life. Several large changes had happened all at once. I left a job that had, over the course of a year, turned very sour. I ended a romantic relationship with someone I loved. I moved across many states back into childhood home.

In the aftermath of this life earthquake, I was heartbroken. I had never felt so sad or hopeless in my life. My anger at what had happened to me overwhelmed me. I remember having uncontrollable bouts of rage, and persistent thoughts about the utter purposelessness and perceived failure of my life. Feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness clouded my vision. I once told a counselor that my life felt as if I was wandering through a forest, all alone. Everything was a dull gray, a mere silhouette of its former life. I could not see the colorful beauty of the trees, those trees which had once quickened my soul with wonder.

Searching for healing, I attended a nighttime compline service at a church near my parents' home. In the dark, candle-lit sanctuary I found a seat in front of an icon of Jesus' face. He had large brown eyes and long brown hair. His head was encircled by a soft yellow halo and his hands gently formed the sign of blessing. I kneeled in my pew, clasped my hands in prayer, and looked deep into his eyes, imploring him to see my pain. Do you see this pain, Jesus? Do you see my pain? I would not take my eyes from him until he answered.

What I began to see in his eyes was pain, fear, and loss. I began to see Jesus' journey in the dark valley of his life. He was betrayed, then beaten, spit upon and mocked. He was dressed in a costume of a king and given a crown of thorns. Humiliating, unfathomably painful. Physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Jesus' suffering is unfathomable to many of us. And not to say that my suffering even remotely approached the passion of Jesus Christ, but I had never experienced so much pain and suffering in my life. It was unfathomable to me at that point. I felt like I was meeting Jesus in the valley of the shadow of death. I felt like I understood Jesus and his journey in a way I had not before. So in that dark, candlelit sanctuary, with stone walls that made it feel like a tomb, I sensed Jesus' compassionate presence with me there. I knew he was with me in my pain and suffering; I knew he understood. He had been there, too.

Now the job I had held, which had turned sour, had been a position at a church. An Episcopal church. And for reasons I can tell you over a cup of coffee, I was miserable. When I left, I felt betrayed and deeply wounded. My trust had been broken. I never wanted to work in a church again. My plans to become ordained, maybe – out the window. And so I was understandably quite hesitant to attend Yale Divinity School.

I applied to Yale Divinity School during this time of wandering in a gray forest. I had always wanted to attend, ever since I took religious studies courses in college that broke open rigid doctrines and rules I'd learned as a child and broadened for me the horizon of God's love and mercy.

For three years in my early twenties I'd opened an application on their website but hadn't completed it. When I finally attended an Open House, I felt excitement bursting like fireworks within me. But I still did not want to be ordained. I still did not want to work in a church. I was so confused.

When I brought my concerns to Jesus at a Taizé Prayer Service at Richmond Hill, I told him, Jesus, this makes no sense. And as I chanted the songs and lifted my questions heavenward, I heard a voice from within, saying, "Trust me, I've got you. Just take the next step."

And so I applied.

The same God who met me in the valley was now beckoning me forth into what would be a land of milk and honey. A land of friendships and camaraderie with people who cared about the same things I cared about. A land of reading poetry theologically, of seeing God in poetry, sacred texts, and the human experience.

The same God, who mourned with me in that valley and brought me into the land of milk and honey, led me here to this mountaintop experience at Grace. This mountaintop experience at Grace where I have learned to trust myself again, where I have learned to trust the church again. Thank you for being you, Grace Church. Thank you for bringing your whole selves to the table. Thank you for bringing yourselves to Sunday worship and to my sermons. Thank you for bringing your fullest selves to my summer study, Reading Poetry Theologically, to the Women's Group, the Men's Group, Vestry Meetings, and the visits I have made to some of your homes. Thank you to Dee and Cindy; it has been a blessing to work with you. A very special thank you to Emily, who is an amazing supervisor and the kindest of souls. You all have shown me that I can experience great joy while working at a church, while ministering with and alongside God's people. You have shown me that my presence is enough and that my gifts are valued.

I am also deeply grateful to the Young Priest Initiative for facilitating this exploration of call. The Young Priest Initiative is a Diocesan vehicle for finding and forming young leaders in the church.

I share this story with you this morning to thank you for an incredible summer internship even amidst these unprecedented times.

I also share this story with you to tell you what Jesus' passion, crucifixion, and resurrection mean to me. God is with us in our suffering, which becomes all the more powerful when we remember that God knows what it is like to feel pain, suffering, and loss. But the story doesn't end there. And that is what is so hopeful to me.

Christ, who endured that horrible suffering and death, was raised to new life. Yes, was physically raised from the dead.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

(1 Peter 1:3)

Friends, there is suffering and death in this life, no doubt about it. And there is, unfortunately, suffering that will result in following the way of Christ. But there is hope. There is redemption and freedom in this life; I have seen and tasted it myself. Christ was raised so that we, too, might walk in newness of life. Christ met me in that tomb and brought me out, and whatever is ailing you this morning, Christ will lead you beyond it.

And—there is redemption and freedom in the life to come! Just as Christ rose from the dead in glory, we will too. I know that seems far-fetched, certainly it does to me much of the time, but friends, we have got to hope. We have got to hope for something. We live in a skeptical society that loves to think humans are always in control and understand everything. And in that skeptical society we can forget that miracles do happen and God does love us.

The same God who led me from the valley to the mountaintop is here, today, among us. God is with us gathered here today. I want to close us this morning in prayer together, with a prayer written by Saint John Chrysostom.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, you have given us grace at this time with one accord to make our common supplication to you; and you have promised through your well-beloved Son that when two or three are gathered together in his Name you will be in this midst of them: Fulfill now, O Lord, our desires and petitions as may be best for us; granting us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the age to come life everlasting. Amen.