

Luke 24:1-12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Song of Solomon 8:6 Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. 7 Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned.

March 31, 2013 (Easter)

Song of Solomon 8:6-7; Luke 24:1-12

“Jesus – a Love Story / Love is Stronger than Death”

An art show called “Faithmarks” opened this week at St. Mark’s United Methodist Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. St. Mark’s is located on the Northside of Chattanooga, an area that would probably most likely be similar to the Fan in Richmond. It’s eclectic, young, and hipster. Not a whole lot of regular church-goers I suspect. I’ve been in Northside at least once on a Sunday morning. You can get a really, really good biscuit at a restaurant called Aretha Frankenstein’s and sip coffee on the sidewalk while you watch people walk their dogs or push their kids in strollers. It might not be what you consider a “religious” community, and yet...

And yet – I come back to Faithmarks. Faithmarks is a different kind of art show. You see, about a year ago, folks from St. Mark’s started wondering how they could connect in their particular community. Mind you, I didn’t say, they wondered how they could get more members into their church; I said that they wondered what they could do to really show love and respect for their neighbors. What they decided to do was to create an art show based on tattoo art that revealed a spiritual connection. Folks sent in their stories and those chosen were then professionally photographed at this 100 year old church that looks more like ours than like most newer churches. Then the pictures and stories were revealed this week to anyone who wanted to come and see them. Many of the participants were Christian – but not all of them. Some of the designs were imagery you might expect, crosses and the like, and others told a very personal story – like the woman who had a tattoo of a hummingbird because it’s the only bird God created

that can fly backwards. “She perceives that represents her ability to look backwards to what she's come from to see what she's flying toward.” (www.timesfreepress.com)

This story reminded me of my favorite lines of poetry in scripture, the ones we read from the Song of Solomon this morning. “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm.” Today, we might say – “Tattoo me across your heart; tattoo me upon your arm. Love is stronger than death, passion more fierce than the grave.” Now, I know that there are also a lot of tattoos out there that may not be so artistically or spiritually motivating – but in the culture of the “inked” - art and symbol are alive and well. Put a dove behind your ear so you can remind yourself to listen for the still small voice of God’s Spirit. Put a cross on your arm to remember your brother in prison. A tattoo is a daily reminder of one’s story, when going to church may only recall that story once a week. It’s permanent, with you until death – or at least until re-design.

Perhaps, in the leap of our imaginations, we can open up to the passion of our own story and imagine what God is inscribing upon our hearts with the symbols of the Easter story. Our culture is a culture of images when we Christians have long been a people of words. Why all the fuss about the new “Bible” series on the history channel? You can see it. Somehow that makes it more real for a lot of folks who grew up watching TV, playing video games, and learning from the thousands of images that they see every day. I haven’t watched it to say whether that’s great or not so great – but it is certainly popular.

What is changing minds about the new Pope and the face of Roman Catholicism? It’s the pictures that can be shared instantaneously around the world. Compared to his predecessor, his image is one of embracing poverty, living simply, and caring for the people more than rising

rank in the church. The image that spoke to me was one that came out on Thursday. To reenact the story of Jesus and the love he showed for his friends on the night he was betrayed, Pope Francis was washing the feet of prisoners, and his photograph was taken kissing the foot of a young, Muslim woman. For me, that was a sign of beauty, compassion, and recognition of our common humanity. For some others in the church it was a sign of such drastic departure from tradition that they were outraged.

So when we wish to tell or show our faith story – remember that the Jesus love story was more like a show of tattoo art, or a compassionate response to a group of prisoners. It was about reaching people exactly where they are, not where we wish they would be. It was about loving them without condition or expectation. This is the story that reaches deep into our hearts and reminds us that love is stronger than death, that God is more powerful than any grave. But it is also the story that can inspire rage and hatred. That kind of inclusive love is a threat to those who want Christianity to be an exclusive club. Judas turned his heart against Jesus because he was motivated by greed, and Jesus wasn't going to be the kind of King who would overthrow Jerusalem and seize power for the Jews. Peter denied knowing Jesus out of fear when it was clear that the mobs were turning against his beloved teacher. Those images are out there too – even today. Christianity that has this great love story to tell is plagued with antagonists and foes – many of the worst coming from within the tribe. There are pictures of hate-filled Christians all over the internet. This kind of image has warped the nature of Jesus' message throughout the centuries. Warring and killing in the name of Christ is as prevalent, or perhaps more so, in terms of media attention and air time in the history books than all the loving kindness that has been practiced in Jesus' name. Washing someone's feet isn't news – unless maybe you're the Pope – and unless maybe the feet you washed were female and of a different faith.

Suppose we've made too big a deal about telling the story and it's time to put into action the story that we really believe. The crucifixion is our reminder that love is so powerful, so extraordinary – that it can get you killed. But even more so Easter morning is our reminder that love is so powerful, so extraordinary – that it reaches beyond the grave and counts death as little more than a rock that must be rolled away. Mary Magdalene knew, or at least suspected as much. Reviving her story may be a way for us to get closer to this truth. In all four gospels, she is there to bear witness to the empty tomb. She, along with other women, runs to tell the story, and if she had an iPhone, she would have sent the fearful and disbelieving disciples a picture of the empty grave. She believes. That doesn't mean that her pain is any less. All who were close to Jesus are grieving, reeling from the pain of his undeserved death. But she lets something deeper touch her heart. She dares to imagine that love is greater than all the pain, than all the cruelty; and that God could transform something so wrong and hateful into an act of courageous love that would mock forever the limited power of the state and the exclusionary hatred of the religious zealots. That's the story we have to share.

So how will we live the greatest love story ever told? Will you wear it on your sleeve? Will you seal it with a kiss? Will you wash the feet of prisoners, feed the hungry, heal the sick, and bind up the brokenhearted? Will the snapshots of your life story tell of the living Christ's great love – poured out in the life of Jesus – and continuing in the lives of his followers? I hope, I pray that it will, for that's how God's love continues to inspire us to hope by busting open the graves of hate, fear, greed and jealousy.

I saw *Les Miserables* with my sister Friday night, and the lyrics that are part of the finale remind us that our faith is both as simple as and as difficult as loving one another. The main cast members sing to one another:

“Take my hand

And lead me to salvation

Take my love

For love is everlasting

And remember

The truth that once was spoken:

To love another person is to see the face of God.”

Amen.