

CAN EVIL WIN?

Luke 24:1-12

*Preached by the Rev. Carolyn Grohman at North Presbyterian Church, Williamsville
Easter Sunday, March 23, 2008*

"Be handed over to sinners, be crucified, and on the third day rise again."

The date: 1939 to 1945. The place: Germany and Poland. The event: the Holocaust. Six million Jews murdered simply because they were Jews. The Holocaust was a watershed event, forcing us to come to grips with the reality of evil in our world. Did evil win?

Well, it would appear so---except that the magnitude of that evil produced some good---some good people who did good things, like the family in Holland who sheltered Anne Frank and her family, and Oskar Schindler, the German who saved the lives of hundreds of Jews.

Did God abandon God's people during those years? Or could it be that God was raising up some people to confront the evil on behalf of God? And could it also be that God was there in the concentration camps suffering along with those six million Jews? Some good did come out of that evil time, including some changes in our own thinking, such as the recognition that we Americans cannot isolate ourselves from the rest of the world and that we Christians need to stand up and proclaim loudly that Jesus was a Jew. Did evil win in Nazi Germany? No, not ultimately.

Fast forward to September 11, 2001, that infamous day that we will never forget. Those attacks on the World Trade Center forced us to confront the existence of evil in our midst. Did evil win? It would certainly appear so.

And yet, think of all the good people who did good things in the midst of the evil around them: the 350 New York City firefighters who gave their lives trying to save others; and the countless number of rescue workers and search teams who worked around the clock at Ground Zero; and Todd Beamer and several other passengers who confronted the hijackers on United flight 93 and prevented that plane from reaching its destination, thus saving far more lives than the 44 who died when that plane crashed in Pennsylvania. Did evil win? No, not truly.

Fast forward again to Good Friday, 2006. In Buffalo, Sister Karen Klimczak was brutally murdered by one of the parolees she was trying to help. This petite nun, who had worked so long and so hard to rid Buffalo of drugs, crime, and violence, had become its latest victim. But even with such an evil crime, some good has come forth. Sister Karen's "Peaceprints" campaign has gained new momentum, and there is now a Sister Karen Klimczak Center for Non-Violence that is continuing her legacy. The tragedy has been turned into a gift of life. Did evil win? I don't think so.

Evil, you see, can win only if God has abandoned us and if God is no longer in charge. But we Presbyterians believe that God is always present with us and that God is in charge of this world. Now it may not always seem to us that God is in charge. In the midst of evil events,

such as 9/11, we lash out at God with questions like: *Where are you, God? Have you deserted us? Why did you let this happen? If you are really a God of power and love, how could this happen?* We struggle to find answers that satisfy us, and often we have more questions than answers. In fact, some of the glib answers provided by others simply raise more questions.

In her book *Congregational Trauma* (The Alban Institute, 1998), Presbyterian minister Jill Hudson tackles the problem of evil. She says, "In the wake of trauma, there appears always to be some period...of questioning life's meaning and purpose and wondering if the God in whom we've believed has an active role in the world...Questioning is the start of the rebuilding phase for most people, and we need to assure each other that God *is* able to handle our doubts and questions" (p. 2). It is very human to cry out to God in the midst of our suffering, "Where are you, God, when I need you?" Jesus himself, of course, when he was hanging on the cross, cried out to God, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

And it certainly must have seemed to Jesus that God had indeed forsaken him. Betrayed by one of his friends, denied by another, and deserted by most of the others, Jesus must have felt abandoned not only by his friends but also by God. Here was an innocent man convicted of a crime he did not commit and sentenced to die a horrible death by crucifixion. It's no wonder that he cried out to God, "Why have you forsaken me?" That first Good Friday was the darkest, most evil day of all time, the day when evil certainly seemed to triumph.

But evil did not have the last word. God had not abandoned Jesus, and evil did not win. God was, and is, still in charge of this world, and as Jill Hudson says in her book, "God's ultimate response to evil is victory" (p. 10). In the 16th chapter of the Gospel of John, when Jesus is talking to his disciples shortly before his arrest, he says to them, "In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" (John 16:33)

That is the message of Easter: that God has conquered the world. No matter how much evil we encounter, no matter how dark the days are, no matter how bleak the future seems, with the looming recession and the war in Iraq, God is always present with us and God is ultimately in charge of this world. In the words of the old hymn, written by a minister [Maltbie Babcock] who once served the First Presbyterian Church in Lockport:

This is my Father's world. Oh, let me ne'er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the Ruler yet.

Now it may not always be possible for us to sing that hymn with great conviction. There may be times in our lives when we are so overcome with grief, or so shaken with doubts, or so immobilized by fear, or so weary from the struggle, that we may wonder whether God has abandoned us and whether God really is the Ruler. During those times we may need to rely on others to carry us along until our faith is strong enough again to sustain us.

In her book, Jill Hudson tells a story about her husband Jay. When Jay Hudson was in his last year of seminary, his sister was killed in a car accident. His faith was so shaken by this tragedy that he confessed to the church where he was serving as a student intern that his faith could not sustain him. His church family responded by saying, "Jay, our faith is strong enough

to hold you up---let us do it while you can't." Jill comments that "this response reframes the question. It is not about God's power or goodness, but about God's faithfulness. God is a listener who suffers our pain and will not abandon us, and there is *always* one person who can articulate this truth for us, even when we are at different stages of believing it" (p. 11).

According to Luke, the women who went to the tomb early on that first Easter morning were so overcome by grief that they did not remember that Jesus had told them that he would "be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." It took the angels at the tomb to remind the women of Jesus' words and to articulate that truth for them. The angels' faith could sustain the women until their own faith was strong enough to enable them to see that evil had not won after all. And then the women were empowered to return from the tomb to tell the apostles the good news of God's victory over death.

It is in the community of faith that we can assure one another of God's loving, faithful presence with us and of God's ultimate victory over the powers of evil. It is here in this church family that we can reassure one another of the great truth of Easter: that evil cannot win, because God has already won the victory. "*Be handed over to sinners, be crucified, and on the third day rise again.*" Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.