

No Memorial Needed
Matthew 28:1-10
Easter Day, April 16, 2017
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It's a tragic scene that we've all witnessed: a roadside cross, bouquets of flowers, perhaps some candles, a stuffed animal or a jersey from a favorite sports team. Sometimes there is a hand-painted sign with a name and a date. You drive by and get a mere glimpse, but you know there was a moment on this road when something horrific happened and a person or persons lost their lives.

Unfortunately, roadway deaths and the memorials that spring up in their aftermath have become so common that some states are looking for alternatives.

Joyce Keeler knows the pain of losing a loved one in a tragic automobile accident. Nearly 30 years ago, her son lost his life on a rural road in Delaware. For Joyce, driving by the site of the accident is so painful, she still avoids it, even after all these years.

Instead, Joyce goes to the Delaware Highway Memorial Garden at the Smyrna Rest Area near her home. There among the trees, shrubs and flowering plants is a pathway lined with memorial bricks that bear the names of those who have died on the roads of Delaware. In the center of the garden is a pond with goldfish, frogs, water lilies and a gurgling waterfall. Tucked amid the busyness of nearby highways U.S. 13 and Delaware 1, it is a peaceful place to remember and reflect. To honor the memory of her son, Joyce sits quietly near the brick that bears his name.

Delaware is one of several states providing alternatives to roadside memorials because traffic safety officers worry they are a dangerous distraction to drivers and put those who visit and maintain them in harm's way. In most states such memorials are illegal, but officials rarely enforce those laws. Several states have implemented sign programs that offer a safer option to mark the site of a crash. Others have adopted laws limiting the time a memorial is allowed to remain on the side of the road. Still others offer to plant memorial trees at the sites of fatal accidents. Joyce Keeler much prefers the garden over a roadside memorial. "Things like that get old, and the flowers fade," she says. "But [the garden] will never go away."

Long ago, another mother lost a son. It's not likely, however, that she ever went back to the place where he died. There's not much chance she wanted to sit by a cross which had been the instrument of her son's cruel and painful death. She'd seen enough as she had stood there to witness it. So, where would she go to remember?

- Did she want to erect a roadside memorial?
- Did she want some place, like a garden, perhaps, where she could visit and think about her son?
- Did she want to erect a pillar of stones in his memory in his hometown of Nazareth, or in Bethlehem where he was born?
- Did she want to post a sign at the site of some of his most famous miracles?
- Did she want to turn the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary into a shrine or museum in his honor?

Her people, after all, had a strong tradition of building memorials. The patriarch Jacob set up memorials to mark decisive events in his life, as did Joshua after crossing the Jordan. Surely the thought crossed her mind: "How can I remember my son? How can we *all* remember him?"

Maybe she'd heard from John, her son's trusted friend, that on the night before he died, her son himself had talked about being remembered. They'd been eating and celebrating the Passover feast when, suddenly, Jesus took some bread and gave all of his followers a piece, said a brief prayer of thanks, and then told them to eat it. "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Of course, we don't know for sure what Mary was thinking, but we can surely imagine the agony she endured from Friday to Sunday morning. Even the care she received from the "beloved disciple," John, could not alleviate her sadness and despair at having lost her child.

Then the news came: the tomb is empty! After the initial questions and confusion subsided, much of what she'd heard Jesus say must have come flooding back to her mind, only now she understood it in a whole new way. *She would never need to visit a cross or a tomb! She would never need to erect a pile of stones. She would never need to maintain a museum or plant a garden. Her son who was dead was—in fact—alive! He is alive!*

On the Sunday morning following the crucifixion, Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James and Joseph went to Jesus' tomb. The very same instinct that drives people to the site of a crash propelled them to the site of his burial early in the morning. They came not with a handmade cross and flowers but with oils and spices. They came not to set up a roadside memorial, but to care for the body of the one they followed, the one who loved and accepted them when no one else did. They came prepared to do the only thing they could think of to honor the memory of Jesus.

It is a normal reaction—this need to take care of, to tidy up, to *do something*. Steve Lopez, for example, knows that instinct. He has tended a roadside memorial in Arizona where his wife, daughter and granddaughter died in a 1999 traffic accident. He goes periodically to pull weeds and clear litter from the spot where his life changed forever.

And after every winter storm, Brad Tackett shovels snow from a roadside memorial in Queensbury, NY, that honors the memory of a high school classmate who died in a crash. Others come when the weather is better to mow and remove weeds.

Like the two Marys, it is all they can think to do. They want people to know they remember and that they care. But the Marys of the 1st century never get to their task. Before they can begin their work on Jesus' body, they are greeted by an angel who tells them that *no memorial is needed*. Jesus, the one who was crucified, has been raised from the dead. He is no longer in the tomb.

In their confusion, Mary Magdalene and Mary run to tell the disciples what they have seen and heard. Along the way, they are met by the resurrected Jesus. They want to hold on to him, to worship him. But, Jesus instructs them to find the disciples and tell them to meet him in Galilee.

Our instinct to mark and remember life-changing events is a good one. We are following an ancient tradition when we memorialize those we love in some concrete way. The two Marys went to the tomb of Jesus to do exactly that—to mark the spot where their lives had changed. They wanted to remember and honor the one who had so significantly altered the trajectory of their lives, just as families and friends erect and care for roadside memorials at crash sites to mark the spot where their lives changed in an instant. They seek to honor and remember those they loved.

On Easter Sunday we, too, come to remember the moment when life changed forever. We come to remember that Jesus, the one who cares for us, who loves and accepts us, has been raised from the dead. He is alive!

That is the essential proclamation of Easter, that Jesus Christ who was crucified and buried is now alive, and that truth changes *everything*. The resurrection is a powerful, reality-altering word from God announcing God's victory over evil and sin and death. Granted, it can be a hard truth to grasp, no matter how many Easter Sundays we hear it. Easter is bigger than any of us can ever fully understand. We do not have all the answers. No one ever does. Easter is new life, an empty tomb, forgiveness, resurrection. That is not something to understand. It is a reality we grow into.

So, we proclaim the truth again and again, year after year: death has been defeated. Life wins. Love wins. And, therefore, no memorials are needed. Except one—and that is the memorial of *our lives*.

By following Jesus, by giving Jesus our lives, we become living memorials to the risen Christ. Paul captured this idea when he wrote to the believers in Rome: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (12:1-2)

For the early disciples, following Jesus did not end at the cross; the resurrection changed everything and proved to be the beginning of a whole new life. Jesus would meet them in Galilee to help them understand that new life. They were to follow, to feed the flock, to baptize and make disciples. They were to care for the poor, needy and marginalized, and love friend and enemy alike. This was their memorial. They had work to do and in doing it, they would remember and honor the one who was sending them.

Jesus is still calling us to new life, calling us to continue to follow him in the places we know best--at work, at school, with our families, in conversation with friends, in service to our community. The one who has shown us resurrected life calls us to share that new life with others. We're to tell them about what he has done for us and we're to offer them the same love, grace, hope and healing that we have received from Christ.

To honor Jesus, to remember where our lives were changed forever, no memorial is needed. We celebrate Jesus instead with a transformed, resurrected life. We are the only memorial Jesus wants or needs.