

Series: The Difference

April 10, 2016

Title: New World

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Text: John 20:19-23

The Valley of the Shadow

Thunder Dog:

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Michael Hingson woke up early that Tuesday morning in early September. It promised to be a beautiful day: a cool north wind had blown the clouds away. But Michael wouldn't see that day or any other day; he had been blind since infancy, a victim of receiving too much oxygen during neonatal care.

Hingson headed out the door of his northern New Jersey home with his guide dog, Roselle, at his side. He took the train to lower Manhattan, got out at the station beneath the World Trade Center, and rode the elevator to his office on the 78th floor of the North Tower. It was September 11, 2001.

At 8:46 a.m. hijackers flew the first airliner into the upper floors of the North Tower. In the aftermath of the attack Michael and Roselle joined the many thousands of people seeking to escape the doomed building. The only way down was a seemingly never-ending stairwell.

In his book, Thunder Dog, Hingson tells how Roselle remained calm and focused throughout the entire ordeal, offering encouragement and strength not only to her master, but to many others who climbed down the stairs that horrible day.

Little did Hingson or the other thousands of people know, but the worst was yet to come. By the time he reached street level, the South Tower had been attacked and was on the verge of collapse. Suddenly the tower came down, filling the canyons between the cities towers with dense, poisonous smoke and ash. Hingson and Roselle found refuge in a building down the street, huddled with other New Yorkers in a place that had become a living hell. They had been thrust into the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Easter Evening:

The evening of the first Easter Sunday was very much like those harrowing hours following the collapse of the twin towers. A small band of men sat huddled in a locked room somewhere in Jerusalem. Their world had collapsed around them, leaving nothing but defeat and terror in its wake.

Could it possibly be that just one week ago Jesus had ridden a donkey into the city to shouts of praise and waving palm fronds? Had they actually walked before him, placing their coats on the ground to make a royal path for the long awaited King?

Jesus had boldly taught in the Temple every day that week. True: they had avoided public places at night in case of an ambush. But they had hoped that the tide would turn in Jesus' favor. It did not.

Instead, the ambush did come. In the wee hours of Friday morning one of their own ratted out the Master. He was led away to be tortured, condemned, scourged and crucified.

Now, like the survivors hiding from the smoke and ash of the destroyed towers in lower Manhattan, the disciples hid themselves in a locked room, desperately hoping that there were no more traitors in their midst. They may have survived, but their world was in ruins.

The Valley of the Shadow:

The Story of God and His World is a U-shaped story.

It begins with God's good Creation. It begins with peace. It begins with a world that is ordered and safe, a place of joy and life.

But that good Creation was invaded by chaos and disorder – an "anti-creation" force that is sometimes called Sin in the Bible. It is the force that attempts to ruin and destroy everything that God created. It is the force that brings our world – and our own stories – down to the bottom of the U.

And that's where we find the Valley of the Shadow of Death. That's where, like Michael Hingson and his dog, Roselle, we find ourselves wandering around in the wreckage of what had once been a happy relationship, the joy of good health, the peace of financial security. It's where we come to the

realization that the chaos is not just *around us*; it is *inside us*. It's a place where we can become so lost that we despair of every finding our way.

That is, unless the Good Shepherd comes to lead the way. When he comes, he meets us in that lowest place and brings us back to the top of the U.

The Good Shepherd

The coming of the Good Shepherd:

In the disciples' Valley of the Shadow of Death there were rumors that the Good Shepherd had somehow returned. Peter and John confirmed the women's report that Jesus' tomb was mysteriously empty, with the grave clothes left behind. Mary Magdalene claimed to have actually seen Jesus alive.

So there they were, at the bottom of the U – stuck between two worlds. There was the world defined by the brutal death of Jesus and the danger that they would join in his fate. And there was this other world, unseen and unexplored, a world where a dead king walked again.

And then, all of a sudden, the Good Shepherd was there.

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John 20:19 NIV

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"

Nail prints:

In David's psalm, he writes:

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Psalms 23:4 NIV

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.

When the Good Shepherd is present, the Valley of the Shadow of Death becomes an in-between place. Death is there, but so is Life. Despair is there, but so is Hope, Defeat is there, but so is Victory.

And that is exactly how Jesus came back to his disciples. He came *into their Valley of the Shadow of Death*. He met Mary at the door to his tomb. He presented himself alive to his disciples, but with the scars of the nails that had pinned him to the cross on his hands and side:

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John 20:20 NIV

After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

The Good Shepherd had not just come to their Valley of the Shadow of Death. No, he had entered its deepest horrors himself. He had gone before them, all the way to the bitter end. He had the scars to prove it.

And now he had come back to lead them safely into a brand new world.

Your valley/your shepherd:

When we're in the Valley of the Shadow, the only thing we want is to escape. You know the old line from Star Trek: "Beam me up, Scottie!"

But that's not how God works. He doesn't beam us up. Instead, He beams Himself *down*. He shows up right in the middle of the mess. He shows up, even when we've locked the doors to our hearts.

He won't leave us lost. He's the Good Shepherd.

New World

New Creation:

So what does it look like when Jesus comes and offers to take us out of the Valley of the Shadow and into the new world beyond it? What is the way forward?

John tells us that after Jesus appeared to the disciples in their dark and lonely place, He offered his peace again – this time as the door into God's New Creation:

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John 20:21 NIV

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

John has already told us that this happened on "the evening of that first day of the week." He is echoing the ancient Creation Story – pictured as a week – with this as Day One. In other words, we're headed back to the top of the U. The same peace and wholeness that was present in the Creation before chaos and evil appeared is now once again becoming a reality.

The Creation Story is even more vividly echoed in the word John uses when he says that Jesus "breathed on" them. This is the same word that is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament in the story of the creation of Adam.

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Genesis 2:7 NIV

*Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and **breathed into** his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.*

Now Jesus is re-creating human beings, breathing his Spirit into them to give them eternal life! The Valley of the Shadow of Death has turned out to be God's new Garden of Eden.

New Mission:

New life means new purpose. **First** comes knowing Who God truly is – present as the Good Shepherd who has conquered Death. **Second** comes knowing who we are meant to be – human beings reborn through God's Spirit living in us so that we truly reflect God into His world.

Only then can we begin to grasp the reason God put us here. Only then can we understand *where we are going*.

Jesus says to the disciples:

[Slide 8]

John 20:23 NIV

"If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Raymond Brown explains:

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In [John 20:22] the primary symbolism of the giving of the Spirit concerns the new creation, a creation that wipes out evil, for the Holy Spirit consecrates men and gives them the power to make others holy in turn.

Adam's purpose in the original Garden of Eden was to tend it and make it fruitful. Our purpose in God's New Creation is to tend God's world in such a way that God's Spirit can *wipe out evil* and *make others holy*. Each thought, each action, each moral judgment is an opportunity to roll back the kingdom of darkness with its chaos and confusion. Even the Valley of the Shadow must become a Valley of Light when Jesus walks with us through His Spirit!

New World:

That first Easter evening Jesus answered the three biggest questions we face in life: **[Slide 10]**

- Who is God?

God is the Creator who comes into His broken Creation and re-creates it through His Holy Spirit.

- Who are we?

We are God's dwelling in this world. His Spirit lives in us, transforming us into becoming reflections of God Himself.

- Where are we going?

We are on a mission: to wipe out evil, one thought, one action, one act of love and forgiveness, at a time. Our mission is to invite others to take the journey out of the Valley of the Shadow and into God's New Creation.

And that is how we make the difference in our world.