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October 29, 2006 Plymouth Congregational UCC
Totenfest & All Saints Remembrance

The End/The Middle/The Beginning
John 11:32-44

*The trees grow more restless;
October wind weaves through them;
they shake their arms in dismay
as if to fight the coming cold
and the grief of leaves going.*

*Autumn air does a heart-dance
On branches already gone barren;
the misty air clings to golden leaves,
making the trees bend even lower.*

*It is a season to hold the trees close,
to stand with them in their grieving.
It is a time to open my inner being
to the misty truths of my own goodbyes.*

*Autumn comes. It always does.
Goodbye comes. It always does.*

*The trees struggle with this truth today
and in my deepest of being, so do I.*

*Every autumn, nostalgia fills me;
every autumn, yearning holds me.*

*I cling to the ripeness of summer,
knowing it will be many long months
before I can catch a breath of lilac,
or the green of freshly mown grass.*

*And so I begin my fallow vigil,
remembering the truth of all the ages:
Unless the wheat seed dies
it cannot sing a new birth.
Unless summer gives in to autumn
springtime will never embrace me.ⁱ*

Before I even read her poem this week, Joyce Rupp's seasonal description came to life in quiet starkness as I watched the snow fall on red-leaved branches. As the white settled softly into a tree before me, bright colors dropped like stones – fast, with no floating on stillness or ripping in the wind – just an unyielding and final plummet to the earth.

Why, when we begin speaking of death, does it seem easier, gentler, to begin with the seasons? We speak of the natural passing of time, and the cycles inherent in all life.

One of the enduring children's books on death and life is entitled *The Fall of Freddy the Leaf*.

In this beautifully written story, the reader follows Freddy's life after budding to summer green and fall splendor, where he finally fights against the coming winter with all of his stem's brittle tenacity.

As he finally surrenders to the earth, rejoining his roots with an unanticipated peace, the book ends with two expectant words: "The Beginning".

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The end, the beginning – where do we enter today's scripture reading? Shall we first celebrate the resurrection of Lazarus? ... jump to the end of the story and its celebration, because we've managed to hear the whole in one sitting and therefore know the final outcome? Get to the point, the new spring where there is healing!

We could begin there, with the astonishment of the story and the miracle that Jesus works for his dear friends. And if I were focusing on resurrection today, I would probably aim there.

But sometimes we need to wander through the mess of the story, the middle, where the ending is not yet apparent.

We need to weep with Martha and Mary, Lazarus's sisters;  
and with Jesus in acknowledgement of the pain death can bring.

Even though *he* knows, presumably, how the story will end, Jesus still weeps.

Our culture doesn't tend to like dwelling in the sad places.

We place expectations on when it's "appropriate" to "move on".

We like timetables and want to have an idea as to when the discomfort we're experiencing, either as the bereaved or as a bystander, will come to an end.

Some of us become uneasy when Prayers of the People just keep coming.

Some of us hear someone lament a painful situation and immediately want to cheer him or fix the problem.

To be with someone in their distress is a challenge for us as individuals and even, sometimes, as the church.

In the church we manage to preach death only a few times a year.

At funerals we obviously do – but we also focus strongly on the hope of new life, on resurrection.

On Ash Wednesday we receive ashes on our foreheads that remind us from where we come and to where we will go: "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return". Our mortality meets the tangible reminder in oil and ash. But how many of us annually attend that particular service?

And then Good Friday, the service remembering Jesus' death on a cross. How un-holiday-ish! Especially when Easter – the crux of the story – is so close on the horizon!

These are the acceptable times we are given to dedicate our thoughts to an inevitability for all our lives.

And many will say: "that's enough!" Because Christianity moves us toward new life in Christ and resurrection – to spring!

Yes it does. But that's the end of the story...or the beginning ☺.

We live here, however, in the messy middle.

And like it or not, that's where we spend most of our lives.

Loved ones die, and we will die.

We at Plymouth don't tend to be the "pie in the sky" type of believers.

So what do we do with death in our midst?

Pass over it to get to the end of the story?

It leads me to that familiar question: *What would Jesus do?*

Today's story shares that "Jesus began to weep".

Whether you read the Gospel as miracle or instruction manual,  
as firsthand account or hopeful memory,

its stories offer us a reflection for our own lives.

"Jesus began to weep" at the sorrow of his friends.

*Whatever the end of the story*, death causes pain in human life *right now*.

And Jesus' tears are a public acknowledgement of the fact.

Shouldn't the church acknowledge it as well?

We who call ourselves Christians – Easter People –

hold before us the hope of the end of the story – the beginning –  
which is new life beyond what we in this life call death.

We have that hope!

But today, with Totenfest and All Saints,

we remember those whom we have loved in this life and who no longer share this life with us.

Today we consider ourselves and one another.

Today we share tears with Martha and Mary, with Jesus,  
with the gathered crowd who have nothing to offer *but* those shared tears.

This is a part of being community.

We share with one another life's joyful passages:

birth, baptism, and marriage.

We lift one another by also sharing the passages of goodbye:

divorce, illness, and death.

These are the messy moments in the middle of life and new life.

These are the Easter Saturdays...

Easter Saturday... That period of time between Good Friday (the crucifixion) and Easter Sunday (the resurrection) that lies in empty space.

It is Holy Saturday, when the disciples hid themselves away in fear, in sorrow that their Messiah had been taken from them before they were ready.

They had no sure hope for the coming resurrection; it hadn't happened yet!

We who have heard the end of the story have celebrated Easter Sunday perhaps our whole lives.

We live as if we need not sit through the "fallow vigil" as Joyce Rupp's poem names it; the exhausting agony of personal loss of our savior.

We skim over Holy Saturday by preparing for Easter:

coloring eggs and baking hot cross buns.

Only when we know death for ourselves do our spirits remember the sense of that barren ground, desiring but not daring to expect a resurrection of our daily lives without that beloved one now gone from us.

Not all, but I expect many of you have lived through or are currently within a period of Holy Saturday: the deepness of sorrow that comes after a death or another life change, during illness or when everything seems to be falling apart. And in those times of messy suffering, it's hard to wait for the end of the story.

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Today's reading from John has always been one of my favorites, as it seems Chaplains tend to appreciate this text.

In the hospital, visiting strangers struggling through some of their most difficult times, I had a chance to meet Martha and Mary over and over.

I remember vividly my very first night of my first day on call as a chaplain in training.

I received a page to a telephone to talk with a woman.

She was the niece of a man who was dying.

The man had no other family, and the niece was still several hours out from the hospital:
would I please sit with him so he wasn't alone?

I did.

Alone in a room with a man no longer conscious.

We breathed together.

I took his hand.

No words.

No platitudes.

No expectations.

We just breathed together...until he stopped breathing.

Hours later into the night, this man's niece finally arrived.

I brought her to him,

and she cried.

And I cried.

Not for me or for sadness,
but as their community in that moment.

Jesus began to weep.

Alongside Mary and Martha and the gathered crowd.

Can we allow ourselves to do the same when needed?

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I will not deny that there are challenges to weeping with  
Martha and Mary and one another.

How do we discern when those in pain need us simply to  
be with them in their loss,

and then know when they need us to push them forward?

How can we help someone to find the resources and space to  
weep deeply and fully when they need to,  
and then aid them in stepping out of emotion long enough to  
take care of the ongoing necessities of life?

Each of us finds a different way:

the first piece is to be willing, to offer our presence, to hear and *be with*.

As a community of faith, may we be willing to acknowledge the need to weep, the need to express the  
sadness of loss in whatever way we do so.

May we be willing to weep with, and stand by one another in those times.

And then, only when we are ready, may we find our way to the spring,  
through the end, and the middle, into a the beginning.

Where we may sing the seed of new birth:

*Somewhere within  
the seed has sprouted.  
I can feel its movement;  
I can sense its energy.*

*Somewhere within  
the rainfall has reached.  
My desert is gone,  
my dryness has disappeared.*

*Somewhere within  
I've been given life again.  
I can say goodbye to emptiness;  
I can say hello to fullness.*

*Somewhere within  
my yearning has been met.  
The God of graciousness has graced,  
the God of tenderness has blessed.*

*Somewhere within  
I feel at home again.  
I have enthusiasms;  
I want to dream.*

*And so  
the circle of my life-journey  
has once more  
come into its season of spring.<sup>ii</sup>*

May it be so. Amen.

<sup>i</sup> “The Ache of Autumn in Us” by Joyce Rupp, OSM in *Praying Our Goodbyes: Understanding the Spirituality of Change in Our Lives* (Ballantine Books: 1988), 10-11.

<sup>ii</sup> Rupp, 110.