



Our Hope and Our Calling



A Sermon By
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Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

An audio version of this sermon can be found on the Grace Church website at
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/2016-06-05-AAA.mp3>.

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The Third Sunday After Pentecost
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1 Kings 17:17-24
Galatians 1:11-24
Psalm 30:1-13
Luke 7:11-17

Last Thursday, June 2, was National Gun Violence Awareness Day. Millions of people donned orange clothing, as a sign of their commitment to curtail gun violence. The Wear Orange Movement began in 2013 after Hadiya Pendleton, a 15-year-old high school student was shot to death on the south side of Chicago. Her friends asked people to honor Hadiya by wearing orange on her birthday, June 2. Hadiya's friends chose orange because it's the color hunters wear to protect themselves. This cause was taken up by gun violence prevention groups around the country, who last year promoted the first National Gun Violence Awareness Day. This year, the day received a heightened response, with numerous people wearing orange, including high-profile celebrities, politicians, and religious figures. Even a number of famous landmarks were illuminated orange to show support for the cause.

Awareness about gun violence is needed. But more than just awareness is needed – action, compassion, legislation - in short, change is needed. Already in 2016, incidents of gun violence have occurred in every state in the union. According to gunviolencearchive.org over 21,000 incidents of gun violence have occurred in the U.S. this year. Almost 1,500 of those incidents resulted in the death of children under the age of 17. It's too many.

But we can do something about it. As a nation, we are capable of making common sense solutions to gun violence. We are capable of action, compassion, legislation. We're capable of change – of transforming violence, and bringing new life from death. It begins with the activism of a few. Look at the effectiveness of Hadiya's friends' awareness campaign. Commitment to transformative justice is not an easy road to travel. Bringing new life from tragedy is a journey, but it's one that we, as Christians, are especially well equipped to make. We follow Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. Christ's resurrection signals above and beyond all else that our God is a God of new life and never ending possibility.

We hear about such possibility through God's resurrection power at work in today's first lesson and gospel account. In 1 Kings, Elijah, a prophet of God, revives the life of a dead child, the son of a widow Elijah was staying with. Similarly, in the Gospel according to Luke, Jesus resurrects a young man, who was also the son of a widow. The Almighty worked through these two men of God to bring life from death, transforming sorrow to joy in a miraculous way.

These are two wonderful stories, but they may not be easy for us to relate to. Has anyone you known personally ever been brought back from the dead? Think of the 1,500 families who have lost children this year to gun violence. They lost people they loved, and there was not a prophet to touch their bier and bring the dead back to life. The truth is, new life does not usually come in

such dazzling forms. More often than not, new life doesn't come in the way we expect it to, if we expect it at all. And new life may not come in the way we want it to. But it does come.

On December 14, 2012, Scarlett Lewis experienced something that no parent should ever have to endure: she lost her son Jesse in the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Following Jesse's death, Scarlett went on an unexpected journey, inspired by a simple three-word message he had scrawled on their kitchen chalkboard shortly before he died. That message was, "Nurturing Healing Love." Bolstered by his words, Scarlett took her first step toward a new life. And with each step, it became clearer how true Jesse's message was. She learned that love was indeed the essential element necessary for her to move forward and that taking the path of love was a choice she was capable of making. For her the choice was clear: live in anger and resentment, or choose love and forgiveness.

As Scarlett made the choice to love, she began to find peace in her shattered world. She began the Jesse Lewis Choose Love Foundation to develop programs to teach children about the power each of us has to change our thoughts and choose a life without fear and hate. Scarlett wrote her story in a book called, "Nurturing Healing Love: A Mother's Journey of Hope and Forgiveness." Readers are left with the message that love itself never ends and we are invited to apply this lesson even in the face of circumstances that are beyond comprehension.

That my sisters and brothers is new life. Scarlett did not experience new life in the same miraculous way as the widows of Zarephath and Nain. She did however, learn to transform anger into love and hate into forgiveness. She embraced new life in the midst of death.

Scarlett's story reminds me of the congregational refrain in our appointed psalm, "You have restored my life, O Lord." Scarlett's life changed forever in 2012. Life as she knew it would never again be the same. Yet, God restored her to life, a life founded in the knowledge that love nurtures healing and God would be present with her in all things. That doesn't mean that her suffering was or is any less real, palpable, or painful. But she came to know that suffering does not have the last word and it does not represent the final reality.

The same is true for us. God is present with us in all of life's difficulties and struggles working to restore us to newness of life in manifold ways. Most of the time, restoration may not look or feel miraculous. Restoration may not come in the form we would choose. It may be simple or small, but it is there, or it will be.

God is always working to transform and restore creation, working in us changes that bring new life. Jesus said, "I came that they might have life, and have it more abundantly" (Jn 10:10). In him we have received abundant life and the power to encourage, inspire, and work to bring about new life in our communities, society, nation, and world. In him we move from woundedness to healing. Just as God was present in the lives of Hadiya Pendleton's friends, in Scarlett's life, and in the lives of the people of Zarephath and Nain, God is also at work in our lives to transform darkness into light, moving us from death to restored life so that with the psalmist we might say, "You have turned my wailing into dancing; you have put off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy." New life is possible. As Christians we know this well. It is our hope and our calling. Amen.