

An acquaintance of mine, Diana Butler Bass, writes about a visit to the Mt. Calvary monastery about 10 years ago. Mt. Calvary sits on 15 acres up high on the mountaintop overlooking Santa Barbara, CA and the Pacific Ocean. Mt. Calvary was an ideal and very peaceful place where folks would visit and have a sense that they were truly close to God.

While sitting on the porch of the main lodge on a clear day one could look out toward the Channel Islands and down upon the city. The Mt. Calvary monastery was quiet. Very quiet. The silence only broken by a birdsong, bells, or a monastic chant. Being in that place made you feel as though you were getting a taste of heaven.

You may have a similar place in your life. Maybe you have a place where you are able to get away to and experience a sense of tranquility. An early morning or evening walk around your neighborhood, a place near a creek where you place your Eno or hammock, your back porch overlooking Lake Wylie, a special place in the mountains or along the coast. Hopefully, you have a place like the Mt. Calvary monastery where you are able to separate yourself from the chaos of the world around you and be at peace. A place where you have a taste of heaven.

For many people, a visit up the mountain to Mt. Calvary monastery provided that tranquility. But that all changed in November of 2008. As so often happens in California, the winds picked up and the rains dried up. Forest fires erupted near the site of the Mt. Calvary monastery.

Soon the picturesque monastery found itself engulfed in flames. The once idyllic setting was completely destroyed. Why would God allow for death to come to such a beautiful and spiritual place? Why would God allow for something so good to fall victim to death?

Death is a central part of the Easter story obviously. According to the gospel of John's version of events, Jesus and his disciples cross the Kidron Valley and find a peaceful place in a garden. But it is in the garden where Judas, the disciple that betrays him, shows up with a legion of soldiers carrying their weapons and they arrest Jesus.

Another disciple, Simon Peter, is asked if he is a follower of Jesus. Peter denies knowing Jesus. Jesus then appears before the local governor, Pontius Pilate, who asks Jesus several questions but finds nothing to charge him for. So Pilate approaches the crowd and asks what he should do with this man. But the crowds have a clear answer for Pilate. Crucify him!!! Crucify him!!! Crucify him!!!

And that is what is done. Jesus is beaten, nailed upon a cross, and left to die. After his death his body is placed into a tomb. Why would God allow for this one and only Son of God to be humiliated, beaten, and killed? Why would God allow death to occur to someone so pure?

After Mt. Calvary monastery burned to the ground, the terrified monks escaped and fled downhill to the city below. The sisters of St. Mary's Convent, an order whose house sits in a busy residential area, took them in. At St. Mary's the sisters and brothers lived together and shared monastic community with one another. Eventually the monks received an insurance settlement for the old Mt. Calvary and faced the decision of whether to rebuild on the top of the mountain.

After much prayer, the monks decided to sell the scorched site in favor of finding a different location. The sisters, with only a few women remaining in their small community, offered their property to the brothers. Thus, St. Mary's Convent became the new Mt. Calvary, and the brothers took up permanent residence in the city.

The new Mt. Calvary is a contemplative place. But it is not terribly quiet. Across the creek, schoolchildren play, cheering for their teams. The sound of traffic is muffled by the trees but still obvious. Joggers run by and neighborhood gardeners mow lawns and blow leaves.

The relocation meant that the monks could no longer distance themselves from the needs of the world. By moving to their new location, the brothers discovered new ministry in the city. Instead of separating themselves from the world, they discovered that they were called to minister in the world.

Death to their old property meant a calling to witness God at work in a place they never would have gone except for the death of their old life as they knew it.

As I read about Mt. Calvary, I thought about this place. In the woods over here we have the Clay Hill Graveyard. This cemetery contains the remains of people who were both free and enslaved. It gives testimony to one of the worst times in our national history. It gives witness to oppression and death.

But the Clay Hill Graveyard and the Allison Creek Cemetery have become sources of new life for this church and community. All this week I have been able to witness volunteers clearing debris from these woods and carving trails. I have seen volunteers stopping by this week to pull weeds and share communion under the trees over there.

I have witnessed young boys and girls playing soccer on the field while children and adults walk the track. I have witnessed people stop and paint rocks that they have placed in the cross next to the prayer chapel.

I have also been in conversations with two pastors this week in Denver and Chicago that are using your story here at Allison Creek as their symbol for their congregations of how God brings about new life in the midst of death.

Two cemeteries, places that remind us of death, have become places of new life for this community and church. That is what the symbol of the cross is for us today. The cross is a symbol of the worst kind of human betrayal and death. It reminds us of followers of Jesus turning against him and denying him. The cross reminds us of a corrupt government system that was more concerned with protecting power than executing justice. The cross reminds us of all of these symbols of death.

But the cross on Easter reminds us of something much more important. The cross on Easter reminds us that God can use places and events of death to bring about new life. As Mary stood outside the tomb weeping, she encountered a man that she assumed to be the gardener.

This man then asked Mary why she was weeping. He then asked her whom she was looking for. She did not recognize him at the time but then quickly discovers that she is in the midst of the risen Christ. In the place of death she finds new life.

Many of us may have come to this worship service having encountered death recently. Maybe it is the death of a loved one. Maybe it is the death of a relationship. Maybe it is the death of a lifestyle. Maybe it is the death of your dream. Maybe it is the death of something that you thought to be true but now it has turned out to be false.

We live in a world where we can wallow and focus only on the death around us. But Easter invites us to see that death is not the final word. Through places of death, God through Christ brings about new life.

Maybe this new life comes through a cemetery. Maybe new life is found through a loved one. Maybe new life comes in the form of a new opportunity. Maybe new life comes in the form of a new perspective.

We can choose to focus on the death around us or we can choose to focus on God who is constantly in the business of creating something new in the midst of death.

Are we focused on death?

Or are we focused on looking for the new life that God brings on Easter and every day of our lives? AMEN.

---

-Opening illustration from Bass, Diana Butler, *Grounded: Finding God in the World – A Spiritual Revolution*, Harper One, 2015.

-Given: March 27, 2016 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)