

It was just after 2 pm last Monday during Holy Week when I started getting texts about the fire at Notre Dame Cathedral in France. As soon as I could, I got on the internet to see what was happening and saw pictures of the Cathedral in flames. I have been lucky enough to visit Notre Dame in the late 90's while on a business trip to Paris. The night before I flew out, I made it over to the cathedral. There was some kind of service going on. It may have had something to do with healing. There was candlelight, prayers and music. What I most remember was kneeling at the altar rail and feeling God's presence in that place.

And so I was able to have a sense of the horror and grief that we saw so powerfully in the videos that started streaming out of Paris. Crowds gathered to watch in disbelief as they watched the 850 year old Cathedral engulfed in flames. You could feel the heartbreak. In many ways it was as if Good Friday had come early as this holy place where so many people had prayed for so long burned.

The fire was barely out as the donations to re-build came pouring in. At the last count, a billion dollars had been pledged to restore Notre Dame. Of course, the question is being asked – What does Notre Dame mean to a country where only 5% of people who are Christians are practicing Christians? Is it only a historic building? I do not think so, I believe that for the people of France it is not just about history. I am sure there is more going on.

For example, in the midst of the fire, people gathered, prayed and sang hymns together. Crowds were openly crying. People offered words of comfort, hope, love. What did this Cathedral mean to the people of France and the hundreds of thousands who have visited? One article spoke of Notre Dame being a symbol of the unending need for a place of sanctuary when the politics of the day turns to inhumanity. Another article showed pictures of the packed Cathedral at a service in 2015 after 130 people were killed in a terrorist attack. Notre Dame is not just a cultural icon. Notre Dame holds the heart of the people of France AND those who visit.

This same sense of heart, same sense of caring, same sense of understanding has a lot to do with how Jesus Christ showed us how to live. How will this recovery and rebuilding play out? Will a revival of Christianity happen in France? Or will people forget and go about their lives as usual? We don't know, but we can HOPE for rebirth, and new life. This is the gift Jesus has given to us in his resurrection. This is the Easter story: Hope, life, rebirth in the face of death, devastation and darkness.

Commentator from Journey with Jesus, Debie Thomas, who I quote constantly, reminds us that Easter comes in the darkness. Our gospel begins, "On the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee came to the tomb ..." Debie writes "That's where Easter really begins. It begins in darkness. It begins with fear, bewilderment, pain, and a profound loss of certainty."

The women coming to the tomb planning to finish the preparation of Jesus' body for burial, find it empty. Easter had come, but they don't recognize it yet and their discovery most likely causes more pain. Two men in dazzling clothes appear to them and ask why they are looking for the living among the dead. Easter comes in their reminder to the women of Jesus's words that he would be crucified and rise again and it takes time for the women to even begin to understand. And once the women understand, it doesn't go smoothly from there. When the women tell their experiences to the apostles, they call it an idle tale. Only Peter bothers to check out their story and goes to the empty tomb. In spite of this disbelief, Easter comes.

As you look around our church today and see the beautiful lilies and experience our joyful worship and shout Alleluia, Easter may seem as if it has nothing to do with darkness. And yet we have come to this Easter celebration of joy because of the experiences of those first disciples – those women and those men who in the midst of fear, bewilderment and pain discovered that God has come among them in a whole new way. The Messiah they thought was dead is risen and life begins again.

In the times when you fear that the darkness will overcome us, remember that Easter came in the dark - in the midst of fear, bewilderment and pain. It may take time to recognize how Easter is happening, but know Jesus is there.

There are many other places besides Notre Dame in our world, our country and perhaps even in our own lives where there is devastation and darkness. Pause to think about those places (allow for pause – during the service we especially remembered the church bombings in Sri Lanka) Now I want you to shout them out. Shout them out and lift them up to God.

And now know that Easter is already breaking in in all those places. Pray for those in those dark places that they may begin to see the light. This is the power of the resurrection. This is the power of Easter. This is the power of God that vanquishes the darkness with Jesus' light, life and love.