

**Grace Episcopal Church, Galena, IL**  
**April 21, 2013**  
**Fourth Sunday of Easter—Good Shepherd Sunday**

**Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell**  
**Texts: Psalm 23, Revelation 7: 9-17**

When T.S. Elliot penned his often used—and often misused—words, “April is the cruelest month,” he certainly was not referring to the events that lay so heavy on our hearts this week.

And yet, those words are fitting this week in April 2013 when we have witnessed from afar:

- the Boston Marathon bombing and its aftermath that brought a major bustling city to a halt;
- the fertilizer factor explosion near Waco TX that decimated a large portion of the small town of West;
- and the torrential Midwestern rains that flooded homes, businesses, nursing homes, and shut down major highways—and continue to threaten with riverbanks about to overflow.

This week in April 2013 when people were preparing to remember earlier April tragedies:

- in Waco Texas, the 1993 blaze at the Branch Davidian complex;
- in Oklahoma City, the 1995 bombing of the Federal Building;
- in Colorado, the 1999 Columbine school shooting;
- in Virginia, the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting;
- and in Binghamton, NY, the immigration center shooting.

Yes, April may be the cruelest month. And this time, this week in April 2013, we reel from a whole spectrum of tragedies:

- an act of terror: the worst of what human beings can do to one another;
- what appears to be an accident—but what may have been preventable with proper vigilance and adherence to safety measures
- a natural disaster (sometimes referred to as an “act of God”).

There are many ways that we react to things like this:

- we might ignore or avoid them--they are not close to us, no one we know was injured or killed;
- worse yet, we might become numb from yet another in what seems like an endless succession of tragedies—we might develop “compassion fatigue;”
- we might blame or point fingers at a religion, an ethnicity, an “other;”
- we most certainly search for reasons, for explanations that might make us feel safer;
- and we might question our faith: why does God cause these things—or let them happen? Why does God allow one person to die and spare another? What kind of God takes an 8 year old innocent child? Or the first responders who are trying to assist? Is it punishment, a test, God’s will? Why does evil exist?

These latter, of course, are the questions of theodicy, “if God is all loving, all powerful, all knowing, why do bad things happen to good people?” Questions asked and debated for millennia that have no satisfactory answers. For you see, the questions assume that it is about God—somehow.

Maybe, instead, the question should be, “where is God in this?” For God is in this. God has not abandoned us. God is present:

- in the pain of the wounded and the grief of the bereaved with whom God walks and weeps;
- In the outpouring of love and compassion, in the selfless acts of first responders, bystanders, all who rally to offer beds, meals, and housing, or fill sand bags.

This is the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, the one known as “Good Shepherd Sunday.” Every year, we read texts about the Good Shepherd. Today’s are generally read as comfort. But notice that neither deny the existence of evil or trials or death:

*Psalm 23:* Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil. For You are with me.

*Revelation:* These are they who have come out of the great ordeal...they will hunger and thirst no more...the Lamb will be their shepherd and will guide them to streams of the water of life. God will wipe away tears from their eyes.

God is present and offers comfort. But not the absence of bad things. And God is present here with us, with those in Boston and Texas and throughout the Midwest. And on this Good Shepherd Sunday, God is on Franklin Street in Watertown at Church of the Good Shepherd right across the street from where the second young suspect in the Marathon bombings was captured.

The rector of CGS has an important message for all of us. As she met with all kinds of people yesterday and listened to their fears, concerns and experiences, she affirmed the strength of the Boston people. But she heard more than strength. She heard a lot of compassion. She said,

Folks understand that people in many places in our world have to “shelter in place” often. Children in many places in our world grow up with a police presence all around them and/or hearing gunshots in the neighborhood. Although Friday was a hard day, it was also a day that drew them closer to the heart of their global neighbors, and closer to the heart of a God who grieves the suffering we cause to one another.

She goes on to talk about gathering for worship today:

It’s still the Easter season. And at CGS Watertown, we’re going to sing “Alleluia’s” till the cows come home, in thanksgiving for the freedom to gather, thanksgiving for all those who exhausted themselves to keep us safe, and thanksgiving for a God who is already bringing healing and restoring hope in our community.

What remarkable strength! We can have no less. If we are Resurrection people who hear the voice of the Good Shepherd—and I think we are—who gather together to weep, to hold those hard questions, and then to take the light and love into the world—not to whitewash or dismiss the evil that has been done, the death and destruction that has taken place—

But to live as if death and destruction are not the last word but are always, always overcome by the love. Because it is true.

Amen and amen.