

**PALM SUNDAY / SUNDAY OF THE PASSION – March 25, 2018**

***From Great Joy to Great Sorrow***

**(Mark 14:1-15:47)**

When I saw the headline while I was checking out the news on my iPhone the other week, I couldn't help but be intrigued. This is what it said: "Man swept away by wave in Bahamas had asked permission to marry girlfriend before death, family says."

So I immediately clicked on the article and was even *more* intrigued by the first line: "A Michigan man who was swept away by a massive wave in the Bahamas had asked his girlfriend's family for permission to marry her hours before he died."

Reading on, I learned that, apparently, Athena Williams, age 20, and her boyfriend Jonathan Brussow, 19, were vacationing in the Bahamas with her family a couple of weeks ago, when the young man went missing. It seems that he was hiking with the girlfriend's brother on a tall cliff when suddenly they were both hit by this huge wave and tossed into the ocean. The brother survived, but unfortunately the boyfriend did not. In fact, his body was not recovered by authorities for several days.

"When we started dating, he always told me, "Since the first time I saw you, I knew I was gonna marry you," she said. "We had everything planned out already. He had our whole wedding planned out, too, and we weren't even engaged or anything," she added. Then she noted that Brussow had just asked her family for permission to marry her only hours before he was swept to his death by that wave. And he even brought it up with her brother while they were on that fateful hike together, she said.

I don't know about you, but I can't even *begin* to imagine the pain and heartache this young woman must be feeling. She literally went from experiencing one of the greatest joys in life – learning that her boyfriend had just asked her parents for her hand in marriage – to one of the greatest sorrows in life – the death of that very same boyfriend only a few short hours later...

From great joy to great sorrow... Those words could also describe our worship service this morning. The events of Palm Sunday, as we were reminded, were filled with excitement and anticipation. Jesus riding into Jerusalem, like a conquering hero, as the pilgrim throngs cheered him on and spread their cloaks and leafy branches along his pathway.

But then, a mere four days later – only 96 hours – the great joy of that triumphal moment had been utterly transformed into the great sorrow of Jesus' betrayal. Followed in quick succession by an appearance before the high priest, a sham trial full of false testimony and witnesses, mocking and beatings by soldiers who held him in custody, a death sentence pronounced by a cowardly Roman governor who gave into the demands of any angry mob, and finally... death by crucifixion; in other words, nailed to a cross. A death so painful and so hideous that the Romans would never even subject their own citizens to it...

From great joy to great sorrow... Sadly, life is often full of such moments, such transitions. Just the other day, for example, I learned that one of my cousins, William Kropa – known to all of us by his nickname “Winky” – had died. None of my aunts or uncles on either side of the family, except for one, is still living. And now recently death has begun to claim the lives of the next generation – *my* generation – as well. Moreover, with each subsequent death, it feels like a little part of

me has died as well. Not literally, of course. But with grandparents long gone, aunts and uncles also gone, now cousins as well, my past and my identity feel as though they are slipping away. In many cases, memories are all I have left now because the ranks of the people with whom I shared those memories, and *made* those memories, are thinning out. And in the not-to-distant future, all those people will *also* be gone; they will disappear altogether.

Having lost my own father just four years ago, I have some idea of what my cousin's children and grandchildren must be going through right now. What makes this even sadder for them is that my cousin's wife just died at Christmas. In speaking with another cousin on the phone yesterday, she said that he just gave up after his wife's death...

From great joy to great sorrow... Yesterday I learned that Pastor Tom O'Brien, who many of you know – especially those of you who came over from Grace, was not doing well at all. To make matters even worse, this all has happened while he and his wife Dolores were vacationing out in Las Vegas. We were asked to keep them in our prayers. But this is a sad time. Pastor Tom's cancer was always terminal, from what I've been told, and while he has been fighting it with every ounce of his strength and courage these past three years, it now appears that it has finally gotten the best of him and – barring some sort of miracle – the end was quite possibly very near. And then, late last night, I learned that Pastor O'Brien had indeed died. Once again, a reminder of the great sorrow and deep sadness that so often accompany us on our journey through life.

For we all live in the *shadow* of death, as the Psalmist once said, don't we? Death is ever-present, always around us. And we can't escape it; none of us can.

Not even Jesus could. As the Apostle Paul reminded us in our reading from Philippians this morning, Jesus was born in human likeness, and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.

In less than an hour in our worship service this morning, the triumphal entry of Palm Sunday has turned dramatically to the sad and painful reality of Jesus' death. From great joy to great sorrow...

For now, literally as well as figuratively, we are all living in the shadow of death. As we leave our worship this morning, we will still be in the shadow of death. And for the next six days we will *remain* in the shadow of death.

But death, my friends, does not have the final word. Do not despair. Though we live in the shadow of death and, in truth, always will in this life; there is good news on the horizon. As we heard, death even claimed the life of Jesus, just as it claims the lives of our dear friends and loved ones. And will one day claim each of our lives as well.

But – spoiler alert – death could not hold Jesus! In the end, death *did not* have the final word. Great sorrow is *not* where this story ends.

I hope you will all come back next Sunday to *hear* how the story ends. To fail to do so would be like leaving the theater during the play's intermission. And so if you know of others – friends, relatives,

acquaintances, neighbors, coworkers, and everyone else you can think of – who are also living and suffering in the shadow of death, I would encourage you to invite them as well to come and hear the end of the story; to come and hear the good news... of Easter morning!

Amen.