

“Tornado Memorial Service”

My family lives south of town and after the tornado I drove as far as I could into town and then ran to the home of one of my closest friends—his house was gone, but he was safe. From there I ran to the church and found about a third of it gone. I had to know if anybody was inside. One volunteer was in the kitchen and she was safe. I went out to the street and people were running. I didn't know what else to do so I just ran alongside people and said, “Can I help you find somebody?” I dug through houses, I prayed with a young couple who found friends who didn't make it out. Across the street an elderly couple lay dead in the back yard. Running, digging, hoping, praying.

I got called back to the church. The kids' wing of our church was miraculously still standing and it became a triage center. Classrooms where, that morning children played and laughed and learned about Jesus, became places where the wounded were being treated, broken bones were being set, emergency surgeries were performed. Tables where kids had been making crafts a few hours earlier, became beds and places of comfort and rest for the wounded.

We have all spent the last 7 days, looking for our family and friends. We've all had those moments of unbelievable relief at hearing somebody's voice. We have all had that moment of heart-sinking pain at hearing that someone we know didn't make it. Late Friday night I delivered the news to Mark and Trish Norton that their son Will's body had been identified. 18 years old and absolutely overflowing with life and faith. He had just graduated from High School hours before he was killed.

Will is one of 142. The word of comfort today for Will's family and for all the grieving comes from the God of the universe who took human form and walked this earth. He suffered and knows what it's like when we do. Jesus said, **“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live.**

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:1-3, 19, 27, NIV).

To the families of those who died, God is saying to you right now, “Death does not get the last word. That's what I wanted you to see in Jesus' resurrection. Death doesn't win. Even when you think it does, it does not. Life wins.” I don't know the faith stories of all those who have died, but I do know this, God's grace is wider than we can imagine, and that heaven is real, and that this life is not the only life.

Some of us are asking why God did this or allowed it. So much death and destruction. But Jesus never promised that we would be protected from the storms of life. He never promised that life would be easy or convenient if we chose to follow him—almost all of his disciples were tortured to death. What he did promise was to be with us. To be with us **through** the storm. To be with us **as** we grieve. To be with us **as** stand at the graveside of our loved ones. To be with us and listen to us and guide us. Our challenge is to let him. As hard as it may be, pray, talk to God, listen for his words. Let him love you.

Listen, God didn't do this to Joplin to punish us. Read the book. Jesus took our punishment for us. This happened because life on this side of eternity is unpredictable, chaotic and broken. But scripture says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son..." And he hasn't stopped loving the world. You may wonder at times, but the fact is God loves you, God loves Joplin, and God is walking with us through this tragedy and he will make a way where it seems there is no way.

You know, when Jesus was crucified everybody, and I mean everybody, thought that it was the end. The disciples had forgotten what he told them, their world had come crashing down, and eerie darkness covered the land. And for parts of three days there was no hope. But then, but then, but then Easter. Death is swallowed up in victory! Light crushes the darkness. Life wins.

Life won then. Life wins now. And now we get busy. Jesus didn't come back from the grave just to point us to heaven. He came back from the grave to give us a mission. That those who call on his name would be a light to the world. His mission is for us to get busy living. Get busy serving. Get busy rebuilding our city—which I love and believe is the center of the universe. Get busy loving more deeply than you ever have. Get busy taking care of your soul and connecting to the God who knows you by name and loves you more than you can imagine or believe.

For those of you who have lost loved ones, get busy living out their legacy. They may have lost their lives, but none of them would want you to stop living yours because they're gone. Get busy living.

We are not a people without hope, we are people from whom hope, life, and light will shine to the ends of the earth. Because God is good all the time, and all the time God is good. And in the name of Jesus, Lord of life, and light, and hope, and new beginnings, that is the Good News.