



The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL)

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Hope renewed after visit with the women to the tomb

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And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. (Mark 16:2)

In a world of great disparity, something unusual is happening – rich and poor alike are in despair. The events of the day – the world-wide economic crisis, global climate change, the bombardment of Gaza, the instability in Pakistan, the bush fires in Australia, the earthquake in Italy, the rash of shootings in the U.S., the rising levels of poverty – these occurrences have united all in a sense of despair that might have been something like Mary, Mary Magdalene and Salome felt. They approached the tomb that day with a sense of having buried their reason for hope.

For these three women, Christ's triumphal entry of Palm Sunday has turned into the gloom of Good Friday. The adoring crowds less than one week before have scattered, and a handful of women, whose love for Jesus is undiminished by his death, are left to offer one last sign of respect for their fallen leader and to bury with him their fallen hope.

As I sit in my office in Jerusalem, people run to share with me news of hopelessness. Some of our members approach me asking, "We're losing our rights to live in Jerusalem. What will the church do as Jerusalem has fewer and fewer Christians?" As I move through the city streets, the merchants ask me, "Did you hear that 88 houses in Silwan are scheduled for demolition? Did you hear that settlements are expanding? What do the world's churches say about this?" Some ask, "Will there ever be peace based on justice with economic development? Will Israel ever give us land so all can live in peace?" Others say, "Israelis have their own state. Why do they continue to live in fear? Is this what motivates them to elect politicians who promise to answer their fear with more oppression of Palestinians?" One of my Jewish friends said to me, "Yes, we understand this fear in Gaza. But can you also understand the fear of many Israelis in the south who fear rockets from Gaza?" As I watched the bombardment of Gaza earlier this year, my heart was deeply troubled. "Do not all three monotheistic recognize that God has called life sacred? Is this sanctity of life not only for one people but also those who might be called political enemies?"

All these and other troubling questions allowed me to join the women on their way to the tomb. Indeed, circumstances tempt all to be like the women, preparing to bury the last of our hope among the dead. Like the women who planned to tend to their lifeless master's body, we tend to that which feeds our hopelessness. We anoint our suspicion of the other by proclaiming our faith traditions "true" and theirs "false." We feed our fear by building 30-foot (8 m) high concrete barriers. We nurture our grudges by

speaking falsehoods about our neighbors. We arm our hatred by building evermore destructive weapons. We escalate violence by seeking revenge.

When I visited Gaza last month, I felt I was joining the women in their hopelessness on the way to the tomb. I was really taken and overwhelmed by what I saw. The devastation there reminded me of the aftermath of an earthquake. As I walked through the streets or visited the hospital and clinics, it struck me that not a single child was smiling. I came back to my office in Jerusalem, near the Holy Sepulcher, the original place of the tomb, feeling like the women must have felt, accepting the reality that Jesus was dead. Hope was dead. Faith was dead. Love was dead.

It is in such times when things are at their worst that the church must be at its best. It must follow its master to the cross. But the cross was not the end of the story. It must pray for and use its prophetic voice to call a new reality into existence. In the words of the great American civil rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr., the events of holy week speak to this necessity. "There is," King writes, "something at the very center of our faith which reminds us that Good Friday may occupy the throne for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumphant beat of the drums of Easter." While world events at large proclaim hopelessness, the Easter message "reminds us that the universe is on the side of justice. It says to those who struggle for justice, 'You do not struggle alone, but God struggles with you.' This belief that God is on the side of truth and justice comes down to us from the long tradition of our Christian faith." What Dr. King says is true – that the church must work for justice as well as for life with hope.

We Christians approach the tomb prepared to bury our hope. But we can, like the women on the first Easter morning, be transformed by the risen Christ and bury our hopelessness instead. Let us leave behind in the empty tomb all those things that are empty of hope – hatred, revenge, violence, fear, discrimination, insecurity, greed and the like. Let us emerge with those Spirit-given gifts that nurture hope – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Let us tend them more carefully than we tended our former hopelessness. Let us not lose hope that peace and security are coming. Freedom is coming. Justice is coming.

I am not a prophet. I do not know what the future holds for the people in my land. But the Bible, which is ultimately a book of hope, guides my response. The story of the bible holds my faith, my love and my hope. The prophet Isaiah, confronted by his dispirited, oppressed people, reminded them of God's faithfulness to them. For example, in Isaiah 43:18-19 he says: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."

So I remind my people and our neighbors that God has preserved us in this country for the last 2,000 years and will continue to do so. This is not an empty hope. For our God is a God of hope, faith and love. Our God is faithful. He who raised Jesus from the dead is capable of raising our hope sooner than we think.

On May 17 our church will celebrate three milestones: 170 years of evangelical mission, 50 years since the synod's establishment and 30 years of the Arabic bishopric. When I think about how the church has seen times of affliction and trouble as well as joy, I see that the ELCJHL story is ultimately one of hope. God works through us and in us to be Christ's living witnesses. The risen Lord uses this small church in big ways. He calls us to be living witnesses and proclaim the Easter message of resurrection in order to give hope in a hopeless situation. I have learned that the strength of the church is not in the numbers, buildings or wealth but in our living witness. Our might is in our ability to transmit the hope of the

resurrection in a hopeless situation. Our value is in our ability to bring the good news that ours is a God of love and justice -- not only to our people but also to our neighbors.

Please pray that the risen Lord will continue to empower us to proclaim the good news and to work for justice, peace, reconciliation and forgiveness. Please pray that our church may continue to be an instrument of peace, a beacon of hope, a broker of justice and a ministry of reconciliation.

In this time when fear is a uniting factor, let us as Christ's church proclaim the message of the empty tomb – the message of hope. And let us do so not just at the triumphal end of holy week. Let us do so even during the darkness of Good Friday. The world needs this hope now more than ever before. Let us witness for this hope of resurrection for both peoples, the Palestinians and the Israelis, and for the three religions. Let us affirm that it *is* possible to live in peace. It *is* possible that our children may live together and may share Jerusalem. As long as there is a living Lord, hope is ever revived. Please pray for peace with justice for Jerusalem and all of the lands called holy.

Just as the angel at the tomb sent the women to share the good news of the resurrection, this same angel sends us today to bring a message of hope to a hopeless situation, to a fearful world and a divided country. Full of hope, we continue to shout from Jerusalem,

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Al Masih Qam! Haqan Qam!

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