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All Saints Episcopal, Mobile

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

We are in the middle of the Great Fifty Days of Easter - 50 days of celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ beginning on Easter Sunday itself and stretching all the way to Pentecost Sunday. Yep, 50 days of flowers, bunnies, sunshine, baby birds, rainbows and happiness - it's no accident that Easter and spring happen at the same time. Our Gospel lessons tell us about happy times of recognition and meals shared, healing for those long-disabled, restoring the dead to life, and the gift of peace.

But our lives don't always mirror those Happy Easter images and the promise of the Gospel lessons; our world is flawed. Not everyone has the luxury of enough to eat. Not everyone has access to healthcare. And not even those of us who have enough to eat and are healthy can escape the violence that seems to fill our lives in many ways these days.

The past couple of weeks have been some of those times when the mirror has been distorted with violence and fear and sadness. Let's start with the beginning of the week.

Over the weekend last week, I saw several pictures on Facebook of a friend of mine with whom I went to high school in Nashville. He is currently the Director of Music and organist at Trinity Episcopal Church on Copley Square in Boston. He loves to run marathons. He has run in several marathons that I know about - runs for a children's charity - and always wears a costume. Last year he wore a complete Cat in the Hat costume. In the pictures leading up to the Boston Marathon this year, Richard was dressed as Prince William, complete with a crown, a sash and a sword. I wrote to wish him good luck.

I didn't learn about the bombings at the marathon until after I got home from work Monday afternoon. I tried right away to find out if Richard was OK. He was, but Trinity had become part of the crime scene, and today the congregation is worshipping at Temple Israel because they still cannot yet enter the building. Later I read a post from another high school friend, who said his son, who is attending a college that happens to be very close to the finish line, is also fine. I'm

sure you have stories, too, about people you know there. We are, after all, part of the whole human family.

It was a week of violence and fear and sadness. And God wept.

On Wednesday, I attended the funeral of the son of an old friend of mine. He died suddenly - a heart attack while standing in his front yard. He was only 44. It was a violent death in its own way. And very sad. My stomach hurt. And God wept.

On the Wednesday night news: the defeat in the Senate of the gun control bill on background checks for those trying to buy guns. Too much fear. More sadness. And God wept.

Also on Wednesday, a fertilizer plant exploded in a small town in Texas, killing 15 and injuring almost 200, and devastating much of the town. Another incredibly violent way to die. I began to feel as if I were in a fog. God wept again.

On Thursday, I started to do some reading to prepare for today. I came across an article about the mother of one of the children who died at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT. She had testified at the gun control hearings the previous week.

What she told them was that, after the massacre, she had insisted on seeing her son's body, not a photograph of it. And she had insisted on an open casket at his funeral. And she had brought the governor, who was attending the funerals, to look at it, because, she said, "If there is ever a piece of legislation that comes across his desk, I needed it to be real for him." It was real. Noah, her son had been hit by 11 bullets. His mouth and his jaw were blown away; a cloth covered that part of his face. Most of his left hand was gone. The governor wept. And so did God.

In an interview, this woman tried to explain her decision to view, and to put on view, her son's body. "I owed it to him as his mother...", she said. "It's not up to me to say I am only going to look at you and deal with you when you are alive, that I am going to block out the reality of what you look like when you are dead. And as a little boy, you have to go in the ground. If I am going to shut my eyes to that I am not his mother, I had to bear it, I had to do it." She added, "His jaw was blown away. I just want people to know the ugliness of it so we don't talk about it abstractly, like these little angels just went to heaven. No. They were butchered."

This mother's words took my breath away. So much violence. So much fear. So much sadness. God continued to weep.

And then I was brought back to the violence of the Boston Massacre by an internet article on the Odyssey Network. The author was saying that, although resurrection is the theme of the 50 days of Easter, the month of April has, for decades, been filled with particularly horrific deaths:

- The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Apr 4, 1968)
- The murder of 13 persons at the American Civic Association Immigration Center in Birmingham, NY (Apr 3, 2009)
- The shooting death of 32 students at Virginia tech (Apr 16, 2007)
- The end of the Waco siege and the death of 82 members of the Branch Davidians (Apr 19, 1993)
- The bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City that killed 168 children and adults (Apr 19, 1995)
- The Columbine High School shooting resulting in deaths of 15 persons (Apr 20, 1999), a shooting that has been echoed in 31 school since then, most recently in Sandy Hook Elementary School

In Apr 2013, the trend continues:

- On Apr 6 and 8, two separate 4-yr-old children in TN and NJ each shot and killed a neighbor.
- Early in the month, a man brought military grade weapons into a community college in Virginia with the intent to kill.
- On Apr 15, two bombs went exploded at the finish line of the Boston Marathon. Three people were killed and more than 100 were wounded, many severely.
- Later in the week, an MIT campus policeman and one of the suspects were killed. God wept for both of them.

Then it was Friday.

Friday is my day off. I have a routine every morning, as many of you might also. I wake up, drag myself to the living room and turn on the TV to watch the news while I drink a cup of hot tea. When I saw and heard what had happened the night before, I was mesmerized. Again. My stomach began to hurt. Again.

I was hooked early on watching the events unfold in Boston and Watertown concerning the hunt for 'suspect #2' of the Boston Marathon bombing. I couldn't stop. The TV channel played and replayed video footage of the 2 suspects on the day of the marathon. The commentators commented over and over about what had been happening, and repeated the contents of discussions held previously on the show. A tiny band of words scrolled hurriedly and incessantly across the bottom of the screen, adding its own report.

Even though I would have usually been working on my sermon, I sat there, not moving, for hours. I watched the empty streets. I watched the hundreds of law enforcement people in their body armor and helmets, weapons at the ready in their hands. It was otherworldly. My stomach was aching.

When I went out about 2:15 that afternoon to go to carpool, I turned on NPR to continue my vigil for Watertown. But as I drove, I was stunned by the normalcy of everything around me. I guess I had expected everything to look like Watertown. But there was traffic on Government Street. People were on the sidewalk. I had to bring myself back to Mobile. But once I was home again, I was back in front of the TV, captured once again by the ongoing hunt for the remaining suspect.

I didn't know what to do except watch. I tried to pray for safety for everyone. I tried to think about what it must be like to be the hunted, to be the hunter. I watched until everything was over that night. And I thought about 2 of our lessons for today.

And there were comfortable words.

In Psalm 23: *'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.'*

'Do not be afraid,' God says over and over to God's people. 'For I am with you.' When faced with the violence, the fear, and the sadness of the world; when faced with events for which there are no explanations - our hope, our faith is that God is with us at all times and in all places. As we, the human family, watched in fear and trembling, our hope was knowing that God was with them and with us the whole time.

And our hope is also in the words of the revelation to John:

"They (the ones who have come out of the great ordeal) will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

God wipes away the tears of the victims, the tears of the human family and God's own tears. What is left is our hope.

And from Psalm 46, not in today's lectionary:

*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
Though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
Though its waters roar and foam,
Though the mountains tremble with its tumult.
God is in the midst of us; we shall not be moved;
... The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

No more sighing. No more crying. God is our hope and strength.

Lord, have mercy. Amen.