

"Flowers in the Casket"

Mary, Mother of Our Lord
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Luke 1: 46-55

In the early 1970's, a discovery was made outside of Jerusalem. While bulldozers were excavating for an apartment complex to be built, the remains of a man who had died centuries ago were discovered. The bones were found bundled together in a limestone ossuary, which was a Jewish depository for the bones of the dead, an earlier form of what we call caskets. Now, what was so surprising about this discovery was that it was the first time that the bones of a *crucified* man had ever been unearthed. This is amazing given the historical facts that thousands upon thousands of people had been crucified by the Romans in the ancient world. But here, at last, we were face to face with fragments of that old terror, evidence of the cruelty and agony of that awful punishment. These bones, of a man named Yehochanan, which means John, for that was the name scratched on the limestone of the ossuary exterior, these bones are dated by archeology to have come from the first century of our era, therefore, from about the time of Jesus.

But I found something even more interesting about this finding, as I researched and read about it recently. Archeologists who examined the ossuary, the casket, found in the inside corner the remains of what were identified as a little bunch of flowers. Those flowers were doubtless brought and placed in the ossuary when the bones of this dead John were bundled and placed there. You see, the Jewish custom of burial in that era was to anoint and wrap the body of the deceased immediately after death, place the body in a cave or burial vault, and then, when the flesh and organs of the body were decayed, to bundle and place the bones of the dead in its final resting place, in what were known as ossuaries. So, there were two burial ceremonies for the deceased.

So, it was not only the fragments of ancient oppression and terror that were found in the ossuary then, but also little fragments of ancient hope and love. One can imagine the story behind those flowers. Perhaps a friend or a wife, a mother or a father, a son or daughter may have brought them to that bone-bundling as a sign of mourning, but also as a sign of love and of hope and of longing – and perhaps also of prayer, prayer that this one, this Yehochanan, who by his awful death was brought to such utter degradation, brought to such absolute lowliness by some ancient and well-documented tyranny in a story that is now hidden from us, that this one might perhaps be remembered by God and lifted up, raised up from this awful sorrow.

And that little story, imagined and felt, may, of course, mirror for us thousands of other stories – some known, many unknown, then and now – of those who have lived lives only to suffer cruel deaths, and of those who suffer with those who suffer; of those who hope that suffering might know some end, that poverty might be relieved, hunger filled, injustice corrected. Those little flowers there, flowers in a casket, a sign of human hope amid an intolerable injustice, may signal for us our own hopes for the healing of harms and the righting of wrongs in our lives and in the world that we know. But some may look at that finding, and see only pathetic flowers, a futile symbol of beauty in an otherwise dark and cruel world.

The bones of that ossuary, of course, were not the bones of Jesus, though he was among the thousands crucified and among the yet more thousands who have known injustice and sorrow in our world. Nor are the flowers in the ossuary the flowers of Mary, whom we celebrate today. But Mary was, nonetheless, one who kept watch at a cross in the time of the Romans, and among those who made her own signs of mourning and of love and hope and longing and prayer in the midst of a suffering world.

The song sung as our Gospel text for us today is, of course, a song that comes from the birth of Jesus and not his death. But, lest we forget, that birth was the birth of one who was destined for crucifixion. And the song that Mary sings, giving expression to her great joy and hope, is a song that is sung in a world filled with crucifixions and with great sorrows. The very content of her song, sung with jubilation as if her hope were already fulfilled, bears witness to the awful circumstances which she hopes will be overcome by God himself. But, some would ask, in a world that still knows pain and terror, in a world filled with dread and cruelty, is her song only more flowers, more pathetic flowers brought to feebly offer color to a dark place? Some would hear her song and shake their heads at her naiveté. Just more flowers in a casket. Just more dashed hopes and dreams gone the way of all flesh.

But today, I invite us to listen to Mary sing her song, for it is filled with all the biblical faith we need to hear. Her song brings to expression the very shape of the faith itself: the faith that God is the one who brings creation out of nothing, life out of death, promise out of dead ends; that God is the great one of whom the whole scripture sings; that His is the power to bring reversals, the great inversions of what this world thinks and acts as real. Listen to her sing:

*His mercy is for those who fear him
From generation to generation.
He has shown the strength of his arm;
He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
And lifted up the lowly;
He has filled the hungry with good things,
And the rich he has sent away empty.*

How can she sing such a song in this world? How can we? Because the song found its fullest expression in the gift to the world that she would give as God's servant – the gift of her Son, a savior, a lowly servant lifted up on a cross-throne so that all the flowers in all the ossuaries and caskets of the world might truly represent hope and new life and resurrected power. You see, the fulfillment of this song, that which we long for as we sing with Mary her *Magnificat*, is in her Son. God does not bring about the new order of this world, the inversions that raise up the lowly and feed the hungry, God does not bring them about by the standards of this world's might. God comes as a baby and dies on a cross. But those of faith know that that coming and that cross are more powerful than anything else in the world, for they are the power of God's love. And because of Mary's gift to the world, we can live as free children of God who throw flowers into ossuaries and caskets because we know that our loved ones have been lifted up with God.

You see, Mary's song is not simply a pathetic sign of hope, like dead flowers, a sign of hope against hope, but her song sings of truth. It is the word of God that we trust with our whole hearts and souls, with our very lives, and the lives of those we lay into eternal rest, with the Yehochanan's of the world.

A vivid illustration of this hope was witnessed by this pastor last Sunday evening at Holy Spirit Hospital. I was called late that night to come and offer comfort, prayers and support to a family whose loved one died suddenly and unexpectedly. We stood at Erma's bed and prayed the prayers of faith, commending our loved one into God's eternal care. On the table in Erma's room were the flowers from last Sunday's worship, delivered by folks who represent the care, love and support of this faith community. Also in the room was a newly delivered prayer shawl, made with equal parts effort and prayer. We wrapped Erma in that shawl as I read the church's historic Commendation rite.

In the midst of what the world would see and hear as grief, we displayed our best signs of faith and hope – flowers, a knitted shawl filled with prayers, ancient words of scripture that speak of new life and hope, and her family surrounding her bed saying their loving "goodbyes." It was our meager version of flowers in the casket; a tableau of love, and caring, and hope in the face of death.

Today, we pause to commemorate Mary who sang her song, reminiscent of her grandfather 28 generations back, the poet David. And every time the Christian Church gathers for vespers, this song, the Magnificat, has been sung ever since. For more than a hundred generations, this song gives voice to the faith. We sing not of the way things are, but of the truth. We sing of God's grace, God's giving, God's great inversions in this world. It is our song now – for the little, the last, the least, and the lost, and all the Yehochanan's and Erma's of this world. It is hope – flowers in a casket.

AMEN.