

“Telling the Story”

John 24: 13 - 35

Last Sunday night on “60 Minutes,” Lara Logan, a CBS news reporter who is originally from South Africa, broke the silence about the violent sexual assault she experienced on the night of February 11, as crowds of Egyptians celebrated the fall of Hosim Mubarek, their oppressive leader. Logan and a team of reporters from the 60 Minutes crew were reporting in Tahrir Square, the center of the uprising in Egypt, and the center of the celebrations as the people sensed their hard-won freedom. During the reporting, as the team of “60 Minutes” moved through the crowds, Logan was violently torn away from her news team and raped by the crowd of men for 25 minutes. She was certain she was losing her life in the assault. Finally, as the crowd moved with her in the center, they encountered a fence.

There, she fell into the lap of a woman on the ground, who was covered in black clothing from head to feet. Logan could only see the eyes of the woman, who put her arms around her.

“Yes. And she put her arms around me. And oh my God, I can't tell you what that moment was like for me. I wasn't safe yet, because the mob was still trying to get at me. But now it wasn't just about me anymore. It was about their women and that was what saved me, I think. The women kind of closed ranks around me. And I remember one or two, maybe three men standing with them and throwing, the women were throwing water in the crowd. And they were pouring water over me, 'cause I couldn't breathe. You know I was rasping.”

Logan decided to tell her story publicly after she was heralded by women reporters in the Middle East who said she had “broken the wall of silence” by admitting that she had been sexually assaulted. In that culture – and it is still often true in the West– men make no apologies for the sexual assault of women, often blaming the women themselves.

Lara’s story is a re-telling of her assault. She told her story to the world. I found it difficult to listen to the details of the assault. I commend her courage, and I also commend her motivation – to continue to break the “code of silence” that goes with sexual assault in the United States and in the Middle East.

But there is another way I hear Lara Logan’s account of what happened to her on that fateful and violent night in Cairo. I hear how important it is for her to tell the story, to recount the details of her assault, which has changed her life forever.

Lara Logan’s story is a story of grief, of the loss of an innocence she will never regain. And her story is our story. At the level of grief, her story is our story, yours and mine.

I have often thought that grief levels the playing field between human beings.

An old Buddhist tale tells of a woman who goes to the priest, overcome with grief in the loss of her child. The teacher listens to her sorrow. Then, he asks her to go to the homes of the others in the village, to each home, to knock on the doors, and to ask if anyone else has suffered the loss of one they love. She does as he instructs. In each home she discovers that the people have lost fathers, mothers, children, aunts, uncles. She returns to the priest and tells him what she has learned. And in that learning, she knows that she is not separate from any other human being.

This past week the world learned of the death of Osama bin Laden, undoubtedly one of the most wanted people in the world. I am certain that we all had many feelings about the killing of bin Laden. And in the telling of his killing, the memories of the tragedy of 9/11 were awakened. Grief awakens grief. The lives of those who were lost on that day, a day that has forever shaped the lives of those they left behind, were re-awakened again, in a particular way, by the re-awakening of grief, like a wound that opens and bleeds, again and again and again.

Your own story is a holy story. Whatever your story, your story is holy. The Scriptures are only the telling of the stories of people in relation to God. Their stories are from another time, but the stories of human beings in relation to the Creator continue, to this day, and beyond. We may use different words, we may think of ourselves as sophisticated, our science and understandings cannot be denied, but they are still the stories of faith. As human beings, we still require a time and place to tell our stories.

There is power in the telling of our stories. Modern people have turned to psychologists and analysts to tell their stories, but in times past, people have gathered around the fire, or over the kitchen table with a cup of coffee, in parlors, to tell their stories.

Yesterday Jeff and I met our good friends, Hillevi and Merik Lipson, on the steps of the church here to walk together around Lake Merritt. Hillevi's mother is expected to die within the next few days, in Finland. The family there is gathering in her hospital room, children and grandchildren, young and old. Hillevi spent several months with her mother earlier this year, caring for her, and now she is waiting to receive the call that her mother is gone. As we walked around the lake together, we talked about her mother's illness, and about Hillevi's grief during this time. I told her the story of the night my father died. She listened, & I listened to her.

Perhaps there is no "true" story or no "untrue" story. When you and I experience something, we each have our own way of looking at what happened. And as time passes and the story is told and re-told, the story may change. We may tell it differently each time, and as we change, the story changes. Your telling of it will be different than my telling of it. Both tellings are true.

As a pastor I know that the most important time after the loss of a loved one is during the days that follow the death, as business and preparations for a memorial or gathering are made. Often the family comes together, and without preparation, the stories are told. "Remember the time...!" someone may say.

And so it was as the followers of Jesus walked to Emmaus, "about 7 miles from Jerusalem." They were talking together about "everything that had happened." Like our telling of the stories of our lives, of our experiences, each of the stories would have been different. Maybe Cleopas was prone to exaggeration. Maybe one of the others was always a hero in the stories she or he told! Maybe they disagreed on the details, and so of course these things were being debated.

However it is the story was being told, it was a story of their grief. When tragedies occur, it is important for the health of human beings to tell the story, again and again, to turn it over in their minds, like turning a stone over in our hands, to see it from different points of view, to learn new things about it in the telling.

And as they told the story, Jesus appeared to them, and walked with them.

The Holy One appears to us as we tell the stories.

Today, on Mother's Day, tell the story of your mother. Bring her to life again, see her anew, love her all over again. Your story is a Holy Story.