



The Reverend Emily Williams Guffey, Rector
Sermon: March 31st, 2024
Easter Sunday, the Feast of the Resurrection

Readings: Isaiah 25:6-9, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11
Gospel: Mark 16:1-8

*The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.
This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.*¹

The English poet and theologian Jay Hulme wrote a brief poem called "The Carpenter"² that says only this:

*He knew his son
would outshine him
from the beginning,*

*so taught this child the
only thing he could:*

*The skill of taking
blades and wood,*

*and turning death
into something
else entirely.*

Turning death into something else entirely.

Jay is a poet, speaker, and theologian, twenty-six years old or so, who is also a warden at his church—and his church is about 1100 years older than he is. (Let that sink in for a moment, as we consider what it might be like to be a warden, responsible for and working toward the upkeep and restoration of an eleven hundred year old building!)

¹ Psalm 118:22-23, appointed for the day

² In [The Backwater Sermons: Poems by Jay Hulme](#) (2021), p. 74

Jay is also transgender and works frequently and naturally to articulate how he sees and lives queer faith and theology.

In each of these identities - a writer, a warden, and a trans individual - I believe he knows something, sees something, about how stones, weathered and worn from water and wind, can be rejected and at first glance left for dead (or if nothing is done, left for dead), or how stones, weathered and worn down, may alternately be lovingly tended and built upon, strength upon strength.

I believe that Jay in his identities also knows and sees something, about how wood, cut from a tree, dies, and can be used for violence, as in the cross, or can be used for structure, for safe harbor, for protection, as in the sheepfold, in which the Good Shepherd harbors each one of the sheep, and when one - but one - sheep is lost or hurting or in any kind of danger, goes all out to help and protect that one.

I believe that Jay also knows and sees something about how metal - blades - can be used to sever, to puncture, or to construct; to harm or to heal.

Stick and stones do break bones, and it's not true that words can never hurt us. We might wish that they would never hurt us, but they do, often more incisively than a blade. A word can be brutal; a word can be beautiful. Do we wield them as weapons, or do we craft and construct them into instruments, turning, like Joseph the carpenter and Jesus his son - the Son of God - death into something else entirely?

It depends, in the first place, how we see. Jay is also known for traversing old buildings and literally seeing them in new vantage points, sharing his photos from the rafters and bell towers of the world in his Instagram feed. It depends, in the first place, how we see and what we expect to see. That is, it depends greatly on our faith.

The women go to the tomb that morning expecting to see a huge stone impeding their ability to be close to their beloved friend. They go to the tomb that morning bearing spices, and maybe they have cut a flower here or there to place outside of that giant stone that is between them and their beloved friend. Yet, when they walk up to the tomb, they are terrified because they do not actually see what they are expecting. They do not see the stone that they are expecting. They go, expecting death, for that is what they know, but they see something else entirely.

They find that the stone has been rolled away and the tomb is open—and their terror multiplies, because not only has their greatest fear been realized two days prior, that their friend had been brutally murdered in front of their faces, but now their next greatest fear as well: that his beloved, ruined body had been stolen, that the forces that killed him continued inflicting and wielding indignity upon him by stealing his body after death. Terrible and terrifying, yet to them—given what they had been through, given what they had seen, given the stones and the wood and the blades that they had seen—this also was not entirely unexpected.

There is someone strange sitting outside of the tomb, wearing all white, telling them not to be afraid, not to be alarmed. (Why is it that angels always say “Do not be afraid,” when that is always what we are, and rightfully should be?) They are afraid and alarmed, and this figure says, “Do not be afraid, do not be alarmed!” He says, “He is not here, he has been raised, he is ahead of you. Go tell the others.” And in Mark’s gospel, they do not, at least not yet. They are, as Mark’s gospel ends, afraid and terrified and also amazed. They do not find their words; they are not able, at this point, to tell what they have seen.

Our ability to see, speak, and articulate depends, in part, on what we expect to see. That is, it depends greatly upon our faith.

I was in here [the sanctuary] yesterday as many of you were working on filling this space with flowers and light and all manner of shiny things. And in an off-hand comment, I heard that to get these flowers into all of these places took “a thousand cuts”. And I expected to look out and see death: my mind went right to that phrase, “death by a thousand cuts,” that is the accumulation of one paper cut after another, each infraction not big enough to cause much harm, but over time, weathered and worn, there is bleeding and there is death. So if a thousand cuts surround us, and a thousand paper cuts can amount to death, and blades and wood and stone can lead to death or to something else entirely, are we not seeing around us something else entirely?

A cut can sever or it can heal; a cut can be brutal or it can create something entirely beautiful. The thousand cuts that surround us are each bloom being cut from its branch, so as to construct a composite of overwhelming abundance, bursting in every place. A thousand cuts to trim lily blooms so that they can fill a wooden cross and make it something else entirely. It depends what we see; it depends what we expect to see; and it depends greatly on our faith.

Jay Hulme has another piece in which he names each “unfolding flower,” each bloom, as “a tiny act of grace”.³ We are surrounded by thousands and thousands of acts of grace. This is not death; this is something else entirely.

I name Jay Hulme’s work intentionally in honor of his transgender identity, as today, March 31st, is the 15th annual Transgender Day of Visibility, originated fifteen years ago by a woman here in Michigan, that there would be a day of joy to celebrate being trans, being non-binary, being members of the LGBTQ+ community. For at that time there was - and there continues to be - a Transgender Day of Remembrance in November, when we remember with incisive mourning the stones that had been rejected, the stones that had been wielded, the cuts brutally made, the wood and words inflicted violently. But that is not all there is; that is not the whole story.

If the Day of Remembrance is like Good Friday, we as Christians know that is not where the story ends. That is not the whole story. So, the Day of Visibility - in confluence today with Easter - is in fact a little like Easter, actually quite a lot like Easter: celebrating how a thousand cuts of beauty, how a thousand - thousands and thousands and millions - of tiny acts of grace that surround us create and construct love, that is so much greater than death.

³ From the poem “In Memoriam” in [The Backwater Sermons](#), p. 68

The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.
This is the Lord's doing, and in our eyes, it is marvelous.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!