



Grounded hope

Why a church
cemetery?

BY JENNIFER GINN



AS GRAHAM STANDS ONE AFTERNOON in my church office doorway, we chat about the church's cemetery, Rocky Run. Graham, who helps oversee the cemetery, is there for burials, the marking off of plots, the installation of headstones, and more. He has helped dig graves. He knows the location of every family plot, who is buried there and which graves are yet to be filled. For many years, he's been at this work, with a passion!

He loves the cemetery, as do most in this rural congregation. Many will one day be buried there, alongside their loved ones. Some go out regularly to clean family gravestones and place flowers. After graveside services, some church friends walk up the hill or down to visit their own family's plot.

That afternoon, Graham begins to speak about his own family history. This cemetery is in his blood. His father helped care for Rocky Run and dug many graves there when Graham was a child. "Have I ever told you this story?" he asks me.

WHAT GRAHAM REMEMBERS

He was 14 and in the 8th grade back in 1961, when his dad said to him, "You're not going to school this morning. You're going with me to dig up a grave."

Dig up a grave? What? Graham adds, "It wasn't like my dad to tell me I could be late to school. So, of course, I wanted to go!"

Turns out, a family related to one of the families already in the

cemetery wanted their own graves moved there. For years, they had tended their small private family graveyard. Now they wanted a more permanent place near other family members, where the graves would be well cared for.

When Graham and his dad arrived at Rocky Run that morning, work had already started. Two men were digging up the grave to be moved, tossing out shovels-full of dirt. As they got closer to the body, they stepped into the grave and shoveled more gingerly. They must have done this before, Graham remarks, because they knew to be careful. Finally putting away the shovels, they continued scooping up dirt, but more slowly, using their hands. They started finding small corner pieces of wood and metal from the wooden casket that had rotted.

What was left of the body then came into view, as they gently scooped up the loose dirt covering it. The woman lay with hands across her chest. Her folded arms and the fist-sized bun of hair, still visible under the small shrunken skull, clearly defined her upper body's shape. The body was outlined in what looked like black ash, the bones sunken in and rotted. Graham remembers noticing that "she was all there, peaceful looking."

I stop him, having trouble "seeing" the ash imprint. Graham says, "Listen. You go sprinkle a good layer of salt on a table, then pour pepper over it, in the outline

of a body. That's how it looked."

The workers had brought a long, black, canvas-like bag. It took them maybe half an hour to scoop up head, shoulders and torso, ever so carefully, and slide them into the bag.

Graham didn't see the rest of the process: the woman's remains laid into the new grave and the other bodies moved there from the family plot. Now in his 70s, he travels back and forth to the cemetery frequently, but doesn't remember ever seeing a stone marking those relocated graves. Nor does he know the name of the woman whose neat bun and folded arms defined her body, which according to her descendants had been in the ground for 112 years before it was moved.

CEMETERIES AND ME

During my two years of interim ministry with this congregation, I've been to Rocky Run, just a mile from the church, quite a few times to lead graveside services. And in 22 years of pastoral ministry, I've led many other such services in other cemeteries. These days, what is lowered into the ground is usually an ornate, expensive casket that will rest in an air-tight metal vault. The embalmed body we see at the funeral home viewing will, experts tell us, take 10 to 15 years to decompose. How different that experience is from burials more than a hundred years ago! In that time, family members knew their loved one's body would

decompose quickly.

I wonder how families reacted to death in the 1840s, the decade in which the woman with her hair in a bun died. Did they meet the stark details of death head-on, rather than using the more “antiseptic” brush we usually paint with? Did they spend more time in cemeteries than do many of us?

Those with family members buried at Rocky Run speak openly of being comforted by the cemetery. They are drawn there often. It is peaceful and well-tended, I’ll give you that. But honestly, in my first couple of months as their interim pastor, I felt no personal attachment to Rocky Run.

EASTER SUNRISE SERVICE

I heard about the Easter Sunrise service early on, during initial interviews for the church’s interim pastor position. The service is a favorite of many, primarily because it happens at the Rocky Run cemetery. Hearing their passion for that spot, I smiled. But nope, I couldn’t feel it.

Maybe that’s because my childhood picture of Easter Sunrise services wasn’t so positive. I can still feel the sharp, early-morning wind whipping through the pine trees that separated my Baptist church from the road above. Standing next to my dad and wearing my brand new sleeveless Easter dress—a satiny cotton featuring pink, yellow and blue flowers—I was chilled to the bone. Oh, I could have worn

a sweater, but I wasn’t about to cover up my new dress! I’m sure we celebrated Jesus’ resurrection that morning, along with the promise of our own. But I don’t remember any of that. The cold wind and my chill bumps are what stayed with me, well into adulthood and my years as a Lutheran pastor.

As I tell you my story, I see why Graham’s story reminds me of it. He was 14 when he stood next to his dad and watched a body being dug out of a grave at the Rocky Run cemetery. That experience connected him early on to the cemetery, and later, to its Easter Sunrise service. I was 14, too, when I stood next to my dad, my teeth chattering, at an Easter Sunrise service. And that cold morning turned me away from Easter Sunrise services.

WHAT IS THE ATTRACTION?

Though in my estimation it is remarkable, this is most certainly true: People of faith do crawl out of bed before the sun’s up on Easter morning to stand on a hill in Rocky Run cemetery, braving the chilly wind to celebrate resurrection. Why?

Maybe it’s the power of *ritual*, not only on Easter mornings, but at every committal of a body to the ground. Supporting that ritual are loved ones’ care of gravesites, family stories that keep memories alive, and a faith-filled hope that while the body will turn to ash, the spirit will live forever.

That hope is fueled by the

power of *promise*, a promise made by Jesus himself.

In Matthew’s account, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary meet an angel at Jesus’ tomb. Struggling with both fear and hope, they go as the angel directs, to assure the disciples that Jesus is risen. But on the way, Jesus himself meets them and adds his own directive: Send my brothers to Galilee. There he comes to them with the mission—tell my story—but also a promise, “I am with you always!”

Whatever draws my beloved congregation to Rocky Run cemetery on a blustery cold Easter morning, to tell you the truth, I’ve finally caught “the bug!” We face the wooden cross on a hilltop, standing among gravestones that mark family plots. We watch the sun as it grows brighter over the trees. In warm coats, with gloved hands that may quiet a squirmy child or steady a loved one’s walker, we pray and sing and give thanks for God’s promise of eternal life with every loved one already gone. And on that morning, we believe it! 🌸

