

“A Place of Life, Healing and Hope”
Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

The Confederate troops during the Civil War knew that their suffering was going to be great, and they had planned outright, as the war began, how they would handle the death of so many troops. So they followed the train line along city routes throughout the South, and they picked different towns that were farther enough away from each other, where they could bury their dead.

One such town was a town of 6,000 people, in Columbus, Miss. It was picked because it was along the train route. They had a nice cemetery and good people to care for it, and a commitment from this town of 6,000 that they would honor their dead. So, sure enough, as the trains went through, the biggest, busiest train – the one with the most souls – [was the train with] the souls of the dead, who came home in droves.

One battle – the battle of Shiloh – in April of 1862, had the biggest number of dead that were brought to the little town of Columbus. In that one battle alone, were over 35,000 dead and another 100-some thousand were injured. Twenty-five hundred of those dead were brought back to Shiloh – Confederate troops who had died, along with 42 Union soldiers. While there was a great deal of anger at the Northern people for the horrible way they were treating the Southerners – the Confederacy – they decided to bury them in a separate section and not just dishonor them because, while they were horrible as Northerners, they were still people with a soul, so they were buried.

More came – a few more. But still, the greatest battle, with the most losses that were brought to this little town of 6,000, was from that battle of Shiloh. Four years later, almost to the day, in April of 1866, the war ended.

One morning, right after it [the war] ended, on an April day, when the weather was still beautiful in the South; it wasn't quite humid yet – but it was warm – four women got out of bed. They met in the town and they sat down together in the center of town, and they said, “It is time. We need to do something to honor the dead.”

They decided that the only way that this community – and maybe the entire South – would once again ever survive and look on themselves with dignity and respect, after such a humiliating defeat, would be to live lives of dignity, respect and faith.

So they talked for a few hours about how they would make that happen. They decided the way they would begin to heal, and for their community to heal, would be to honor their dead and to place flowers at every single grave in the Friendships Cemetery of Columbus, Miss. It took them days with the help, I'm sure, of husbands, who never get credit.

They would come with wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow of flowers and they would say a prayer, plant the flower in the ground, say another prayer, and move on to the next grave. They kept wonderful lists of notes, not only the name and the date of death, but also other information about what their [the decedent's] rank was, where they were from, and anything else they could get; and, they wrote it all down as an honor for the dead.

When they were done honoring their dead they stopped. The four women, exhausted, with a feeling of joy, having prayed so many times, thousands of times, day after day, hour after hour, minute after minute, over every single one of those wooden crosses.

Then they looked over, and they saw maybe a hundred, maybe seventy-five, other crosses – northern crosses – the people they had hated for years. The people who they despised, who had destroyed their vision of what life would be like. These four women looked at each other, with nary a word, walked over and started planting flowers, and saying prayers on the Northern crosses.

It had to be hard, and I'm sure other townspeople were looking over and going, "What are they doing? Don't they have respect for our dead? Who do they think they are? These people ruined us." But they kept planting and praying, until all the dead were blessed and honored.

Shortly thereafter someone, probably a man, walked over and asked them – and maybe [it was] even the Mayor, I don't know – why they (the women) would do that. That was kind of an appropriate question. They didn't condemn. They just asked, before they started condemning.

The women got together, as one, and said, "They had families. I'm sure they had faith, and everyone deserves to die and be remembered with dignity." Not another word was said.

Shortly thereafter word crept north as the South and North started to come together. People from the North tried to find out where their family member – who had been in the South – where they were. Were they buried? Were they discarded? Were the bodies treated with respect, or mutilated? Now, all of a sudden, one day word got back to the North that these four women had treated those few Northern soldiers with such dignity and respect, and tears were shed throughout the North.

One of the most respected men, who was a judge in New York State, was an author and a writer. He formed Cornell University. His name was Francis Miles Finch, and Francis Miles Finch decided he wanted to honor those women, and he wrote a poem entitled "The Blue and the Gray." It's a little longer than I want to read to you today, but it was so honored that it continues to be printed even to this day. Its original still sits in the Watergate at Washington, D.C., at the home of "Atlantic Magazine."

He wrote that poem that has sustained a 150 years of remembrance, about four women who probably were not even all that respected in their own hometown, but over 150 years later still make an impact, not because they had the loudest mouth, not because they had the greatest educational understanding, not because they had the most wealth, but because they did the most gentle, loving, respectful act of dignity.

People do what people do: They forget over time. It wasn't until 1991 that, in the Mississippi School of Math and Science, and in, of all places, Columbus, Miss. – the same town – one of the professors, Chuck Yarborough, took his students in his history class out to the cemetery one day in 1991, and said to them, "I want you to look at these graves, both Confederate and Union. I want you to read the names because, do you know that every one of their stories is in the public library in Columbus? So I want every class – each one of you

– to take a few names, maybe five, and I want you to study up, and learn about and present what you found about each one of the dead in those cemeteries. I want you to tell their story in class.”

It was so moving to these students that they told their friends and their families, and they felt all of a sudden that the whole town got excited; and, they didn’t want that to just make that the end. So on a day, they decided to go out, and a good number in the town came with them, and they spent a couple of hours just telling stories of the few they saw – their graves and told their stories.

Then, year after year after that and to this day, every year at the same time a class at the Mississippi School of Math and Science goes out and the students pick a few more names. Sadly, there are so many it will take generations before the students go through every single name on their project, and they tell their stories. Then four young women in the theater group, of whatever year it is at the Mississippi School of Math and Science, sit down and tell their stories, and then they stand up and they walk out, and act out what the four women did: planting and praying over the crosses of the dead.

Somebody from the North, from “Atlantic Magazine,” who still had the poem “The Blue and the Gray,” from Finch, showed it to the people there that day, brought it with him all of the way from Washington, D.C., and asked them why they continued to do it.

Dr. Yarborough, with the kids standing around, said, “We have a difficult past, we Mississippians, and the only way we can come to terms with our very complex history is to go through all of it, with this blessing and with some discomfort. When we can relive it we can put ourselves in that position and then learn from it, so that it never happens again. So that whether we are white, or people of color, we can stand together as one Mississippian and say, we are one people; and, then it makes the pain of the Civil War and the Confederacy a little bit more tolerable to understand. We can forgive ourselves and our ancestors, and we can look forward with new hope in life and to a future beyond hatred.

They understood what the book of Revelation was trying to say. They understood that new life comes out of pain. When we are willing to face our own suffering and look into our own souls, and face tomorrow with hope, life can be renewed and restored.

It talked about “Living Water” in that Scripture today, and that Living Water that is also done in baptism that Sterling [who was baptized earlier in the service] experienced today. It’s a moment when Heaven and Earth come together.

The Scots and the Irish talk about the “thin” places. This becomes a “thin” moment, where Heaven and Earth come closer, and that happened in that blessing of those four women. It is remembered 150 years later, because the Holy Spirit calls all of us to that moment. We are called to be that kind of faithful, loving justice as well. It is easy to be bitter. It is easy to point the finger and talk about *those* people, whether they are the Union soldiers, or the Confederates soldiers, or whether their skin tone is a different color, or whether their race, color or creed is a little different from our own. But what is truly remembered in history – long term – are the loving faithful acts of respect and dignity.

I pray today that we will not remember harshly the mistakes of the past, whether they are our own or in our history; but, that we will remember that hope reigns through the power and the blessing of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit to move us, to restore us and heal us of body, mind and soul as individuals and of the Nation.

On this Memorial Day, I pray that you will find the grave, that you will able to lay down flowers, offer your prayer, say thank you for those who gave their lives for our country and for each one of us, and remember that they have stories, they have families, they had dreams. They are not dead, but they are alive in God's Kingdom, where Heaven and Earth were brought together and are calling them home. We offer this in Jesus name. Amen.