

Three years ago a fine teenage boy from our parish was killed in a car accident together with his best friend. It happened after visiting this boy's grandmother in the middle of the day on a country highway; nobody knows quite how it happened. It was difficult to know what to say to the family except, "We're so sorry," and "We love you."

Last month the boy's parents drove me to a meeting of The Compassionate Friends. Do you know this organization? It's a group of parents who have suffered the death of a child. Not necessarily a young child; some are older parents who lost a 40 or 50-year old child. Some of the children died by disease. Some were killed by someone else. Some took their own lives. Parents meet as a group because no one else of us can understand what that feels like. What's beautiful is that in attending to deal with their own grief, they help others in the group deal with theirs. This kind of loss never goes away, but people have been able to build from the loss to a community of support.

The death of St. Stephen, recorded in today's first reading, struck the early church in a similar way. Stephen was a solid young man, filled with faith, one of the first deacons. Hope for the future rested in a man of his talent. However, the spread of Christianity in Jerusalem raised fears, anger turned to violence, the enemies of the church singled out Stephen, and they pelted him with rocks. The early church witnessed the death of Stephen; a family saw the brutal murder of its child. The church tried to spread goodness, but they met terror instead.

Again, this kind of loss never goes away; you don't get over this. In their terror the Christians fled Jerusalem, and wherever they went they told the story, and there they found support. Instead of growing smaller, the church grew larger. Tragedy did not end the story; it became the beginning of a new chapter of growth.

We can't always take away the grief that life can bring. But Christianity is like a support group of compassionate friends. We share each other's sorrows and we offer each other hope.

The story of Stephen brings the Easter season to a sobering conclusion this year. But it's a reminder that faith in Christ can face a tragedy like the cross and see the promise of resurrection. That's the faith we hand to our children, the faith that gives us hope.