

Easter 2019

Luke 24: 1-12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.' Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Sermon:

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Take a full breath, breathing in this mystery of life, of spirit, this sense of resurrection that is all around us. Breathing in and breathing out the abundance of life.

This I believe.

I believe in resurrection.

Unlike Peter and the others in our gospel reading today, I've had lots of time - decades - to come to this belief. My accepting, believing in resurrection, has been a long and winding journey. But here, today, I claim it. But let's begin by looking at our text -

Here, in our story today we have women who are perplexed when they find the stone rolled away and no body, women who after an encounter with 2 dazzling men believe *something* - enough to send them running back to their companions, excited and out of breath; women who

are greeted by a bunch of male disciples who think they are telling tall tales - of empty tombs and visitors dressed in dazzling clothes.

Our scripture starts at dawn of the first day of the week - reminiscent of the creation story in Genesis- might this be a clue - the beginning of a new creation story?

It's at dawn that the women come to the tomb. The same women who followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, the same women who watched as the body of Jesus was taken down from the cross. The same women who saw Joseph of Arimathea take the body, wrap it in linen, and place it in a tomb hewed from rock where no other body had previously been laid. The same women who then went home to prepare spices that would be needed to complete the proper burial of the body.

As the women approach the tomb in our reading today, they are focused on bringing to completion the burial of Jesus' body using this ritual to help with their grief. But as they approach, they find the stone covering the entrance to the tomb has been rolled back. And when they enter the tomb, they do not find the body of Jesus. The reality the women expect is not the reality they encounter. (*I believe in resurrection* - the reality they, we, expect is not the reality they, or we, encounter. This, I believe, is a tell tale sign of resurrection). This incongruity, says Luke, leaves them perplexed. Not dismayed, angry, or vexed. Perplexed: at a loss to make sense of the disconnection between their expectations and what they find.

Each of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, has the women encountering a heavenly being at the tomb. In Matthew, it is an angel (accompanied by an earthquake); in Mark a young man clothed in white; and here, in Luke, it is two male figures in dazzling robes. Note that it is the appearance of the heavenly beings that generates "fear" or perhaps "awe" in the women, not the empty tomb - that left them perplexed. In comparing the three gospel narratives, what is most striking is the differences in what is said by the heavenly being(s).

In Matthew and Mark, the heavenly being addresses the women with very nearly the same words: “do not be afraid; you seek Jesus who was crucified ... he has risen.” And is followed by a command to the women to go to the disciples and to tell them to go to Galilee where they will see Jesus. But here, in Luke, the two heavenly figures ask the women a question “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen.” Then, “Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of man must be handed over to sinners and be crucified and on the third day rise again.”

The question, “why do you seek the living among the dead?” draws attention to the incongruity between the women’s expectations and their experience. They came to the tomb expecting to find the dead, because that is the function of tombs: to house the dead. What they discover is that the “tomb” is now an empty tomb. This familiar symbol of death has been transformed.

No, instead, these men in dazzling clothes invite the women to remember - “Remember how he told you” they say. Twice, while Jesus was in Galilee, he had told the disciples that the Son of Man would undergo suffering, suffering that would lead to death. These heavenly beings help the women re-member - to begin to make sense of Jesus’ teachings. And, of their own initiative, they immediately seek out the disciples to, in turn, proclaim to them what they have seen and heard.

But the disciples don’t believe them, nor do they remember. Peter is curious enough to go to the tomb, where he sees the linen clothes but no body, and he returns home “amazed”, yet we’re not told he believed.¹ That didn’t happen for Peter and the other disciples until, later that day, as they huddled together, Jesus stood before them, saying “Peace be with you”.

Resurrection: I believe in resurrection. The reality we expect is not the reality we encounter.

This leads to confusion, often times suffering, disorientation

¹ Hernon, Holly. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4036

So I wonder, when did the women believe? Was it when the two dazzling men at the tomb told them: “Remember how he told you...” Was it in remembering the words of Jesus that they were able to make the leap of faith to believe?

Something happened to them, but we’re told that to their male companions “ these words seemed an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” They did not believe them.

This is the one time in our reading that we hear the word belief. But it’s not belief, it’s unbelief. The disciples were unbelieving.

Our gospel reading leaves us with this image: of Peter running to the tomb; stooping and looking in, seeing the linen cloths by themselves; and going home, amazed.

What happened to Peter? What transformation, new life, new understanding, was taking root in him?

I believe in resurrection...that new life comes out of empty places.

I have a few stories that I’d like to share -

In 2018, after more than 20 years of war, the presidents of Ethiopia and Eritrea signed a peace deal, bringing an end to a conflict that has closed borders, separated families, killed an estimated 80,000 people. It’s a fragile peace, between those two countries, one that might collapse at any time. There are stories of families being reunited after decades of separation, stories of possibility for new beginnings. And stories of others who were not so lucky. They came home to locked doors, destroyed homes and news that the family they had missed for so long had perished.

47-year-old Mezgebo, whose family home was built right between the two trenches separating these warring lands, also hadn’t been able to go home for the past 20 years. Unfortunately, when he returned last summer, all he found was a pile of rocks. The house had probably been destroyed by a tank or a bomb. “When the war started, lots of villagers disappeared — taken by

an enemy army”, Mezgebo says. He hasn't seen his brother in decades. But when he found the foundation of what was once his house, he got to work anyway, winnowing his wheat right next to the rubble, within view of Eritrean soldiers, trying to bring the place back to life.²

I believe in resurrection...that the reality we expect is not the reality we encounter. That new life comes out of empty places.

Resurrection asks much of us - a willingness to die and be born anew. It takes courage to build a new life out of rubble.

I wept as I listened to a brother and sister who were in the school building in Columbine, Colorado, twenty years ago yesterday, speak about the trauma of living through that day. I cried as I listened to them talk about the long, long road of rebuilding their lives, of realizing the need to move from anger to recovery. Recovery is a marathon, not a race, he said. This brother and sister were speaking of being resurrected - of living into forgiveness and finding new life through it.³

I believe that Jesus showed us resurrection in the body - the real deal, so that we can learn to practice dying before we die. Jesus showed us that in order to live, we must die. Here, now. I believe that death is a necessary part of resurrection, symbolic deaths that happen to us - large and small, all the time. The loss of health, the loss of certainty. Being human involves loss, and loss, death, doesn't come easily, and so involves suffering.

²

<https://www.npr.org/2018/12/04/671260821/peace-is-everything-ethiopia-and-eritrea-embrace-open-border-after-long-conflict>

³ <https://storycorps.org/stories/the-long-path-to-healing-after-columbine/>

I believe Christ IS risen. Not he was risen, or he arose, but is - present tense. Here with us, in our suffering and grief, offering new life, a new way of being in the world.

I believe that resurrection is happening around us, all the time.

This past week I had the privilege of attending the Raw Tools event here in SC. Shane Claiborne and Mike Miller are travelling around the country, turning weapons of violence and death into tools for digging, planting; tools that bring new life into the world. They offered mind numbing statistics of how easy access to guns lead to so much death - - 109 people killed by a gun every day in our country. That means that more than 2 people have died in these first 30 minutes of our service today. (*Feel the suffering*)...At one point during the event, we went out to a forge set up downtown, where people who have experienced gun violence were invited to come beat a gun, from our community, helping to reshape it, re-form it into something new, something that brings life. *Resurrection means 'to rise again'*. As I watched one person after another bang on the anvil, on that weapon of violence, I noticed they started with tentative hits, not quite sure of themselves, and then as the energy grew, the pounding became intense, cathartic, an expression of pain, of despair, maybe even of hope, of change. One woman, talked about her intimate relationship to gun violence - how, when she was a baby, her father shot and killed her mother, then turned the gun on himself. As she reworked the gun, blazing red from the heat of the furnace, the pounding of the hammer in her hands grew stronger and more confident, and she was heard whispering "I forgive you, I forgive you". Another participant called out the name of a friend who completed suicide when they were in high school, pain visible in the way he wailed on that weapon of death. For me they were examples of the possibility for change to come... maybe even hope for something new to be born. Here was the possibility of resurrection – new life coming from an empty place, a place of death.

We see resurrection - a noun that speaks of action, appear again all around us, don't we?
Yesterday, I joined a dozen others from Interfaith Power and Light, a group that is working to

combat climate change here in State College through habitat restoration. I bent down in the soft earth to plant baby trees... New life coming up from empty places.

What is the resurrected Jesus inviting you to this Easter season?

I believe we are called to be, to BE, a resurrected people. Individually and as a community. Jesus carries (present tense), he carries the mystery of universal suffering for us. He allowed it to change him - resurrection, so that we would be freed from the endless cycle of death. Death here and now, in these ordinary lives of ours. Jesus' resurrection frees us from projecting our pain elsewhere or remaining trapped inside of it. This is the fully resurrected life, the only way to be free and loving, and therefore "saved." As Richard Rohr, Franciscan theologian says, we are indeed saved by the cross—more than we realize.⁴

We live as a resurrected people when we do the hard work of forgiveness, when we sit next to the rubble of our former lives and have the courage to prepare seeds for planting, when we beat weapons of destruction into tools that cultivate new life - for this is what it means to follow Christ. As Christians, we are meant to be the visible compassion of God.

And so I close with the words of Carol Penner, words that Doug used in our call to worship:

I believe Christ is an impossibility specialist;
Who brings new life where there is lifelessness,
Who resurrects hope where we feel only despair,
And who can fill us with energy when we are like the empty tomb.⁵

⁴ Rohr, Richard. 2018. *The Universal Christ* (pp. 147-148). Crown Publishing

⁵ Penner, Carol. <https://carolpenner.typepad.com/leadinginworship/easter/>