

From Amazement to Understanding

We are well into our celebration of Easter here this morning. Some of us may have begun celebrating early this morning, maybe earlier than we would have wished, with the joy and excitement of a hunt for Easter eggs with our children. There may have even been a little parental tempering of childish excitement – the reminder that not all of the chocolate goodies in the Easter basket should be eaten before breakfast, the struggle with new Easter clothes, the intervention over the amount of syrup to be eaten with pancakes in the church Fellowship Hall. Or perhaps I'm just projecting my own memories upon a group of undoubtedly perfectly behaved Good Shepherd children. Certainly we've all sung the familiar Easter songs and heard a wonderful anthem from the choir. Our Easter celebration is well under way.

But I want us to pause amidst our Alleluias to consider how Resurrection Day looked to the disciples of Jesus in its earliest moments so long ago. They were not in the position of needing to control their children's joy and excitement or their own, either. But their experience of resurrection, first the women and then the men and especially Peter, moving from amazement to understanding, has much to teach us this morning. I want to consider how their expectations that morning mirror our own and how similar our experience of resurrection really is, appearances to the contrary. I want to look at how Peter went from confusion to conviction, boldly striding out in faith in ways he would have never imagined without the Spirit and power of the Resurrected One leading him on. And, I want for us all to think about how Peter's ultimate understanding of that miraculous Sunday morning impacts the way we live here and now.

It's pretty clear what was on the mind of Jesus' friends as day dawned on the first day of the week. Jesus was dead: to begin with. The women, at least, had seen him die, seen him hung up on the cruel cross, heard his last words, seen his broken, lifeless body taken down and carried to the tomb. There was, as Charles Dickens might have written, no doubt whatever about it. Jesus was dead as a cross-nail. The women who came to the tomb that morning expected to find a corpse. They were prepared to do their last duty for the friend that they'd loved; the man that they had hoped would be the one to redeem Israel. But all that was over now. Jesus was dead. Instead of bringing gifts for his coronation, they were bringing the spices that would ameliorate the stench of his decaying flesh.

These are not, I am sure you will agree, pleasant images to dwell upon, especially after an excellent pancake breakfast and maybe a little too much sugar. But it is important, I think, on Easter morning, to remember what we have been released from in the remarkable return to life of Jesus of Nazareth. Before we can truly claim the power of resurrection in our lives, we must acknowledge the power we have previously accorded to death. If we are not careful about the distinction, about the change, we may find ourselves slowly slipping back under the sway of mortality and decay as we travel down the road that leads from the Empty Tomb.

You see, I take seriously the charge leveled by some, that Christians, although they claim to be Easter People, actually live their lives in a sort of perpetual Saturday. Too often, the way we live our lives proclaims that we still think Jesus is safely buried away, dead to the world and dead to us. Craig Koester, Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary writes, "We, too, assume that death is death, and that our proper response should be to enshrine the dead Jesus in the tomb of memory. We might recall that he was an insightful teacher, a fiery prophet, and a compassionate healer. But he died. So we imagine ourselves called to hallow his memory with

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praise for his legacy, much as the women imagined themselves called to honor his dead body with spices and ointments.”

I would add to this that we too often live as if death had the last word. We struggle mightily against the progression of time in our lives, trying in vain to stay as young as we can for as long as we can as if the prospect of age and the end of earthly life was to be feared. We try to protect ourselves as individuals with bank accounts and portfolios, with acquisitions large and small as if true security could be found in things. We try to protect ourselves as a nation with treaties and advanced weaponry as if we had never heard the words of the Psalmist who declared, “Some trust in chariots and some in horses but we shall trust in the LORD our God.” We hide from the world in addictions and sorrowfully declare that nothing can break their chains. We experience the death of love or friendship and turn to walk away, because once a thing is dead it is dead, isn’t it? We shy away from those who are different from us, who are dirty, who are diseased, because they may threaten our own health, our own sense of self and from there it seems to us a short trip to the grave we so fear. We call ourselves the Easter People, brothers and sisters, but too often we live as if we expect death to be all-powerful and final.

And so it is that when something happens to remind us that the power of death has been broken, that Jesus actually got up and walked out of that tomb, we may be frightened or amazed. When someone proclaims to us the power of resurrection in their lives, their words may seem to us as an idle tale. When someone who has disappointed us again and again says with shining eyes, “I’ve really changed this time!” it may be just another shuck and jive, sure, but it also may be the power of resurrection. When a new excitement grips people somewhere about the potential of human life, sure, it may just be another flash in the pan, but it just might be the power of resurrection. When we wake up in the morning with our hearts full of hope for the future, full of good will towards our fellow human beings, sure, it may just be the proverbial stars in our eyes, but it might also be the power of resurrection, taking root within us just as he foretold.

It’s human nature, I know, to be a little skeptical, to want to check things out, to wait and see. Hey, I’m from Missouri, just like Harry Truman. You gotta Show Me! I guess in the first century, that’s what they said in Galilee, too, because Peter heard this crazy story from these hysterical women and he got up and ran to see what there was to see. Not much, it turns out, besides a pile of linen cloth that looked like it might have been wrapped around a man who’d been crucified. It was enough, though, to catch Peter up short. Luke tells us that he was amazed. After all, Peter had known there was something special about this man. Peter was one of the first to follow him, the first to proclaim his belief that Jesus was the Messiah. He’d heard Jesus say that he would be killed and raised again on the third day. It was just all a little hard to believe; so he went home.

I don’t know about you but it helps me a little, when I’m disturbed by my own lack of faith, by my own lingering in the world of Friday and Saturday, to realize that it even took Peter a little time to get used to living in the Easter world. It takes some time, even once we’ve let the stunning reality of the Resurrection filter into our lives, to go from amazement to understanding. As Luke continues this story from the Gospel he wrote into the Acts of the Apostles, he shows us the way in which Peter had to keep learning about the new paradigm we now share. He had to get over his deeply conditioned sense of separation from anybody who wasn’t Jewish and if we

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put Paul's letters alongside Luke's narrative, it's pretty clear that was a "two steps up, one step back" kind of process for him. When we pick up Peter's story in Acts chapter 10, he's just had to have a vision from God, in which God tells him three times not to automatically dismiss certain things as unclean, in order to prepare him to meet with a Gentile seeker.

To Peter's credit, though, he responds fully to God's call. It can't have been easy for this fisherman from Galilee, to whom the Roman rule of the Promised Land would have seemed like the ultimate work of evil, to go to Caesarea, a town named after the Roman emperor, and meet with a centurion, a high-ranking officer in the Roman army of occupation. It can't have been easy for this man who loved Jesus to meet with a representative of the government who'd put his Lord to death, with a man who wore the same uniform as the ones who'd wielded the whip, hammered the nails, stuck a spear in Jesus' side. But Peter is well on the way to learning that the powers of death are shattered and so he sticks his head in the proverbial lion's mouth. And because of what he has come to understand in the months since he staggered home bewildered from that empty tomb, he centers his teachings to Cornelius and his household on the resurrection of Jesus.

He starts out with what he's just learned from his vision from God. I like the way the New Jerusalem Bible translates his words: "'I now really understand,' he said, 'that God has no favorites.'" Peter is talking about nations, here. In his old understanding, when he considered Gentiles unclean, Peter would have said that any nation not Israel lived as servants of death. But he has come to understand that no one is under the tyranny of death any more, not after the Resurrection. We need to remember this lesson, too. National and ethnic groups are not by nature "unclean." We may decry the decisions of foreign governments or the actions of foreign-based groups but we must remember that individuals of even those nations are as much beloved children of God as we. Nor is our nation especially blessed by God. God has no favorites. God has no favorites among nations and God has no favorites among individuals. We are not to hold ourselves in pride over others because of the relationship we have with God, nor are we to degrade ourselves because we think God prefers someone else over us. We are the beloved children of God, each and every one of us and so is everyone that we will meet in this Easter-touched world.

Peter goes on to proclaim to Cornelius and company that the same Jesus whom their brothers in arms had put to death in the most degrading way has been ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead and Lord of all. Peter has fully entered into the reality of resurrection that he could not comprehend at first on that Easter morning. He has moved from hearing the news of Jesus' resurrection as an idle tale to amazement at finding an empty tomb to understanding that God's raising of Jesus puts makes Jesus the victor over death forever. Jesus is not just Lord over the Jews or even over all of living humankind but over all those who have lived in the past and over all of Creation. Everything that death has previously claimed now belongs to Jesus. The power of death that had so frightened the disciples, that frightens us, is completely broken. There is no need to hide, no need to try to protect oneself from death in any of its forms. The Risen One is Lord of All.

Nor is there any need to fear the newly crowned King. Peter's word for Cornelius and for us is that everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name. The things of

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death that we have taken into ourselves and made a part of our lives can be discarded for they no longer have power – even better, we may discard our guilt for having followed the path of destruction because in Jesus we have complete forgiveness. We are free of the fear of death and free from the fear of retribution. We are free to follow the path of love, the path of Jesus, the path of God.

Not included in the lectionary reading from Acts is the conclusion of the Cornelius story: “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.” It was the sure sign that these unlikely new believers had been accepted into full communion with their Lord Jesus and with the Father of All. Peter ordered that they be baptized as a sign of their new life and he stayed with them for several days – this fierce Galilean and observant Jew accepting the hospitality of Gentiles and a soldier of Rome. It is a remarkable picture of the way in which God truly does set us free to love when we follow the Spirit of the Risen Christ, when we stop fearing death, when we see the world in the new light of the Resurrection.

I said earlier that we Christians are sometimes guilty of living as if we do not truly believe in the power of resurrection, of living in a perpetual Saturday before Resurrection Day, of living as if we were still under the power of death. And I do mean, “we;” I am as guilty as anyone of forgetting what God has done and is doing. Some even say we live as if it’s Friday, when all we can see is the horror of death and destruction, when all we can think about are the earthquakes and dark skies. That great Baptist preacher Tony Campolo is famous for, among other things, preaching a sermon in which he quotes from a Black preacher who reminds his flock, “It’s Friday but Sunday’s comin’...” Do you know it? There is a litany of woes... Our nation is at war; the unemployment rate is close to 10%; politicians and pundits are inciting violence; it’s Friday in America... but Sunday’s comin’. Earthquakes have devastated Haiti and damaged Chile; in Mexico, drug lords are causing near open war in the streets; all around the world, children are starving; it’s Friday in our world... but Sunday’s comin’. Some of you are losing hope about finding work; some of you may be on the verge of losing your house; some of you may have lost loving relationships you thought would nourish you for the rest of your lives; it may be Friday in your heart... but Sunday’s comin’. Well, my brothers and sisters, I’ve got to tell you this morning, I think that Tony Campolo is just a little bit wrong. Sunday’s not comin’. Sunday’s not comin’. Sunday’s not comin’. Do you know why I say, “Sunday’s not comin’?” Because Sunday is here.

Sunday is here. It has been here since that morning almost two thousand years ago when Jesus got up out of that tomb through the power of his Father and our Father, the Loving Creator of All. Sunday is here, because when Jesus arose he broke forever the power of death and evil. Oh, yes, there is still trouble in the world. Oh, yes, there is still pain. The power of Resurrection Sunday is not yet fully realized in our world but make no mistake about it – Sunday is here! Nothing can now separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus. There is nothing that can hold Jesus or the Jesus people down because he is risen. When we celebrate our Lord’s Supper today, we will not be taking into ourselves the symbolic body and blood of a dead man but the symbols of our Living Lord. When we baptize Ria Esame tonight, we will not just symbolically bury her in water but we will also raise her up in witness to her new life in Christ. Sunday’s not comin’, Sunday’s here! It only remains that we claim the power of resurrection

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and let the Spirit of the Resurrected One fill our lives. Will you share with me again the Good News of Easter:

LEADER: Christ is risen! Alleluia!

PEOPLE: He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!