

Lookin' for Love in All the Wrong Places

Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle

Easter Sunday, March 27, 2016

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." (Luke 24:5)

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! We really need say nothing more – that is the purest distillation of the Easter message; it is the crux of who we are as Christians. Easter and the Resurrection are the essence of everything we believe as Christians; it is the sum of our theology. Through the Resurrection we understand that: good triumphs over evil, love overcomes hate, and life prevails over death. The Resurrection teaches us that death is no longer to be feared.

Perhaps we should pause for a moment to make certain everyone has caught up to where we are in our seven week Lenten journey. Indeed, a great deal has transpired since we last gathered in this space waving our palms or laying down our cloaks with shouts of hosanna. Passion week is a wild emotional sprint we compared to a ride on the Coney Island Cyclone! At our Maundy Thursday service, we tried to compress the events of Christ's final Seder with his disciples, and the betrayal, trial, crucifixion and death into a single service. It ended with these words from Mark's Gospel: 'Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"'

During communion on that Maundy Thursday, we underscored the link between the Passover meal and the last supper. We said the Seder remembered the exodus out of Egypt and the breaking of the bonds of slavery. The Eucharist presaged a remembrance of the Resurrection and

Christ's breaking the bonds of sin and death. If Adam disobeyed God in the garden tainting us all with inherited sin, then the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ broke that chain releasing us from sin's deadly grasp. And that is what Paul seems to be saying in this morning's Epistle lesson: "For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ." (1 Cor. 15:21-22)

This morning we rise early with the gospel writer Luke and the women who returned to the rock-cut tomb to finish preparing Christ's body for burial. But when they get there, the tomb is empty and the women are terrified. Suddenly two men in dazzling clothes who we understand to be angels ask: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen." There is uncertainty among the various Gospel writers about

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what happened next but Luke tells us the women remembered Christ's words about rising again and returned excitedly to tell the disciples. But the men, and they were all men, did not believe them – and that's saying it politely. One commentator said the original Greek was more accurately translated as delirious or hysterical from which we get the word hysterectomy. You get the picture. Only Peter had the curiosity, or the energy, or perhaps the guilt to see for himself and in typical fashion he ran. But unlike the women, although he was amazed, he

went home apparently saying nothing to anyone. To my way of thinking that the Jesus movement did not end at precisely this point is compelling evidence, in and of itself, of the reality of the Resurrection.

Easter then, is about breaking the death grip of sin in our lives. Why would God think it to be in the best interest of creation to do that? I came across an article recently entitled *Discovering Forgiveness* that opened a new window of understanding for me. It helped me understand the eternal importance of this ultimate act of salvation. Resorting to more secular or corporate language it is God's mission statement and long-term plan for humankind. But strictly speaking it is not a top-down plan. It is a top-down and bottom-up strategy that requires our full participation to actualize. God through his Son Jesus made their unbroken covenant with us on the Cross. Humankind is haltingly trying to keep its end of the bargain. The article binds forgiveness and love so tightly that they become opposite sides of the same coin.

Forgiveness, says the author Gordon Peerman, is very difficult to pull off under the best of circumstances and virtually impossible if we are mired in sin. If we understand Righteousness as a right relationship with God, then sin, forgiveness and love become the triad that unlocks righteousness for humankind. We are commanded to love "God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our strength, and with all our mind; and our neighbor as ourselves" (Luke 10:27). If we are to live into that commandment, then we must first learn to deal with our own sin. To do that we must accept the assurance that through Christ's atoning death and Resurrection, God has already forgiven us.

Peerman says forgiveness can't be learned and it won't yield to sheer force of effort – it must be experienced. Easter teaches us that forgiveness is experienced at the foot of the Cross and confirmed by the empty tomb. Forgiveness is experienced when Christ enters the locked rooms of our hearts so that we may feel his wounds. Forgiveness

happens when we commend our very lives into God's hands.

Why is acknowledging sin, seeking forgiveness and commending our very lives into God's hands such a challenge? Because it is in direct opposition to our western cultural norms. It is contrary to the historically dubious notion of American exceptionalism and the self-made man. This has nothing to do with patriotism or love of country. It has everything to do with understanding who we are and whose we are. Thus the first step toward righteousness is to give up the notion that we owe nothing to anyone for who we have become; that everything we have accomplished has been entirely our own doing! If we make it up that first step, we are spiritually ready to seek forgiveness. The first place to look is beyond the Cross at the empty tomb. We must first break the chains of sin through God's forgiveness before we can truly forgive or seek forgiveness of others. But don't be fooled Peerman cautions: "Most of what passes for Christian forgiveness is simply a denial of hurt and anger." (C. Gordon Peerman, III, *Discovering Forgiveness, Weavings*, Vol. VII, No. 2, March/April 1992, p. 39)

If we are in denial, then we have not heard the good news of Easter. God created all things in perfection and most especially humankind who was made in God's likeness. Humankind however was not content with its subordinate status and broke the only rule they were given in the Garden: of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." (Genesis 2:17) On that day, we died to our sins. God tried another approach but the law carved on the stone tablets given to Moses at Sinai did not work either. So the LORD put the law within us, wrote it on our hearts; and God said: I will be their God, and they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:33-34) And when that didn't work out either, God came to live among us; to die for us and finally to redeem us.

So here we are on Easter morning. Peter is in his room presumably alone and that seems to be that! But the story does not end here, it is far from complete. In fact, it will continue another seven weeks in Luke's account of the early church. For now, we can say that all of the disciples behaved abominably; that is, in an all too human manner. Sadly, many of us will recognize their actions all too clearly. But this morning we are talking about the relationship between sin, forgiveness, and love. William Sloane Coffin had many helpful things to say about these vital issues. First, he said, "Peter denied Christ just as surely as Judas betrayed him. The difference is that Peter came back to receive his forgiveness. The tragedy of Judas is that he never did." In the days following Pentecost Peter lived into Christ's vision that he would become the rock of the church. Sadly, we know that without God's forgiveness the burden of sin-based guilt was too great for Judas to bear and he took his own life.

But Coffin also asks, "Why are Christians so joyless?" He says, "I think it is because too often Christians have only enough religion to make themselves miserable. Guilt they know, but not forgiveness." I suspect that is also a condition more than a few of us may know. We look for joy in possessions or prestige or even trying to demand respect rather than earn it. But this morning's message is about something foundational without which whatever joy or success we might know will be limited. Human beings seek to love and be loved but unless we are at peace with ourselves we are unable to truly love another. And the peace that precedes love, comes from accepting God's forgiveness *and* the willingness to be changed by it. In the Resurrection we believe that our sins have been atoned for; they have been forgiven. If we can embrace that forgiveness and be changed by it, we will then be capable of loving ourselves, our neighbor, and our God. If we can embrace the power of the empty tomb we can wear the mantle of righteousness and know true joy.

So I would pose the question suggested by the title of this morning's sermon: are you looking for love in all the wrong places? Are you looking in too many

faces or only for traces of what you're dreaming of? With your eye on the empty tomb, look deep within yourself. If there are traces of self-contempt or false pride know that you have already been forgiven and embrace it. At a service on Good Friday that focused on the Seven Last Words, I was reminded that Christ's final word was "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." (Luke 23:46) The preacher elaborated on how secure those hands were; how there was no safer place to be. If Jesus commended his very spirit into God's hands, why wouldn't we be equally trusting? Why wouldn't we abandon our own selfish dreams and commend our earthly lives to God?

It is through the Cross and Resurrection that we experience God's forgiveness. If we allow that forgiveness to change us, we are able to forgive and love ourselves and each other as God has commanded. As Thomas Merton expresses it, "It is our forgiveness of one another that makes the love of Jesus manifest in our own lives, for in forgiving one another we act towards one another as He has acted towards us." (Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1956, p. 12)

May it be so this Easter and always.

Amen