

2019 04 21 Easter at TUMC, What a time to be alive!

Christ is risen! Any questions? (Of course there are questions).

I'm going to be talking about crucifixion, meaning state violence, torture, and death. I'm going to reference sexual violence, and I'll talk about blindness both as fact and metaphor. I'm drawing upon insights and work of Seamus Heaney in his play 'The Cure at Troy', Richard Bauckham's book The Bible in Politics, and the Me Too movement begun by Tarana Burke.

*[Human beings suffer](#). They torture one another.
They get hurt, and get hard. No poem or prayer or song,
Can fully right a wrong inflicted and endured.*

*The prisoners in gaols beat on their bars together
The hunger striker's father stands in the graveyard, dumb
The police widow in veils faints at the funeral home.*

*History says, don't hope on this side of the grave,
But then, once in a life time, the longed for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up, and hope and history rhyme.*

*So hope for a great sea-change on the far side of revenge.
Believe a farther shore is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles, and cures, and healing wells.*

*Call the miracle 'self-healing', the utter self-revealing
Double-take of feeling. If there's fire on the mountain,
and lightning, and storm, and a god speaks from the sky*

*That means someone is hearing
The outcry, the birth cry, of new life at its term.*

Do you believe that things can change?

Do you believe that the way things are today does not need to be the way things are tomorrow?

Can you hope that things can change even here, even now, even in your lifetime, even before your very eyes?

For six days, our Creator God laboured with care and precision, bringing out the world in intricate, interlocking detail, creatures and plants and oceans and stars, weaving these elements together on her loom of space and time. On the very first day, Sunday morning, probably about 5am, she said 'Let there be Light'. And there was light. It was good. When Monday rolled around, God thought a bit more and said 'Let there be a sky which separates the waters above from the waters below'. It was really good. And on Tuesday God said 'let the sea be separated from the dry land'. Even more good. Wednesday was plants, all the fun, nitty gritty details of seed, bark, flower, fruit; branch, stem, bud and root. So good. And then Thursday God thought the heavens needed some more attention, and we got the sun and the moon, and as an afterthought, all 100 billion galaxies of 100 billion stars. All good stuff. Note that God didn't create the sun on Sunday, nice as it would have been. Not sure when God invented time, but it was before there was a sun. That's how you know a master crafter - she don't work off notes, but she knows exactly what needs to happen when.

And all of a sudden it was Friday, everything was in place for the final flourishes - plants to eat, water to drink, weather to talk about. Before long there were animals everywhere, and just before turning in for the night, God whipped up some humans, gave them a quick 101 and orientation tour. Eat any of these, probably best not eat these, name these weird furry things and enjoy yourselves.

She rested on the Seventh Day. Everything she had made was good. We were good.

It has been a long day of rest. And it has also been not very long at all. In that time, we humans have undone creation's delicate balance. We have cut off the airways, tightened the bonds, squeezed out every drop of precious life and gobbled it up.

And even though God was taking the day off, we've had a few texts, here and there, checking in, a few missed calls, straight to voicemail. It turns out that all the noise of panic and pain and violence we were stoking made it to God's ears. And our scriptures contain the fragmentary record of God's repeated and exhaustive attempts to bring things back together.

See, God has this idea about us. God still looks at us and sees goodness, and potential worth saving. The master crafter's vision is all about spotting potential, possibility. And God shares that vision with us, through the words of prophets like Isaiah and Deborah and the activism of people like Esther and Nathan.

But it's not easy for us to see that vision that God has. We have a tremendous capacity for denying, ignoring, and suppressing. We create systems and structures to help us plunder the riches of creation and ignore the consequences. Whatever prophets are sent, whatever visions shared, our capacity to resist restoration has proven cunning and adaptable.

And in the last few minutes of this day, light fading everywhere, God says "okay... I will go", and Jesus is born, and reaches out to save us, and we kill him and bury his body in the earth to hide it away and never have to think of all that we had lost.

And now it's the first day. Sunday. The Sun rises, Jesus rises, like Moses out of the water, like Hannah out of her despair, like Daniel out of the lion's den, like Lazarus from death itself.

Christ, the first born of all creation, the first to rise. He suffers all of our hateful creativity and violent potential and petty cruelty, and it's not enough to overcome his love. Love is the victory - self-emptying persistent love that quietly calls reality back toward life. Jesus is alive.

Now we see only in part. Do you see? Do you believe? Sometimes it is hard to see that Jesus is alive. It is early on the first day of the week, still dark and Mary Magdalene can only see that the tomb is open. She may not understand, but she acts. When the others arrive, they only see the discarded linen garments, and they believe... although we do not know what it is that they believe. Maybe they do not know either, exactly.

I think their belief is something to do with what Jesus tried to show them, tried to teach. An old vision of a new way.

But it's hard to see. It is hard to believe. When you expect to see the gardener you may not notice the loved one you know is dead, especially when your eyes are blurred with tears. It's hard for us to see God's vision of hope and love and life, when our eyes sting with the ashes of arson-targeted Black churches, forest fires, burning cathedrals, flaming effigies, or worse. Murders in Sri Lanka, hotels and churches bombed. History says, don't hope on this side of the grave.

That vision of God's hope and healing can be hard to see on this side of the grave. So we seek. Mary did not have to see to believe. She heard her name, and she knew, and she spoke. Call the miracle 'self-healing' - the utter self-revealing double-take of feeling. Vision may fail you. It may be so hard to look at our burning world and believe that Jesus is alive, that life has conquered death. You may not

hear the voice of Jesus naming you. But watch for that double-take of feeling, that hint of Christ's patient presence that you could easily miss, that the world would rather dismiss.

You see, that's what the crucifixion was all about. Trying to make us turn away from Jesus. They wanted us to see him suffer, see his helplessness, force us to look away in shame and defeat. They wanted to break everything that he taught us, everything he showed us, every connection to the divine vision of harmony and wholeness.

That's the interesting thing about crucifixion in the ancient world. We know it was common, it was widespread, and hardly anybody wrote anything about it. The Bible is really the only detailed source of information on ancient crucifixion. It barely features in the biographies of the conquerors, governors, and emperors. It wasn't worth dwelling on, it was just one of those things that had to be done to maintain order. The deliberate shame, the mockery, the public display, all necessary elements to achieve the utter degradation of violent robbers and rebellious slaves, forcing everyone to see, to fear.

For those underpaid Roman soldiers, it was just an ordinary Friday. This was their job, and they were good at it. And not entirely unreasonable. When it was necessary to compromise with the religious customs of the subjugated Jews, these soldiers agreed to break the legs of the crucified so that they would die in time for the Sabbath to start. And who said it was no good working within the system?

The point of crucifixion, then, is not just to kill a troublesome person, but to overwhelm everything that this person was, to make them a horror, stripped of all humanity. To erase their memory with a tide of trauma. Crucifixion destroys all that a person is. That is what it is meant to do.

Human beings suffer. They invent intricate torments and make them everyday, not worth mentioning. And Jesus said 'me too'.

I don't use that phrase lightly. 'Me too' is about the common experiences of survivor of sexual violence. It is spoken to reject the culture of domination that shames the survivors. 'Me too' humanises and empowers. It exposes the violations that are hard to see, hard to name, hard to talk about. Jesus identifies with those who suffer these violations, those who were stripped of agency, personhood, and who were supposed to be forgotten.

And yet, the women refused to forget him. If we can just hold onto his body, if we can bury him decently, if we can honour him. If we can just hold on. What does this tell us about their need, their determination and the risk they took in refusing to forget? Does this help us to understand the anguish

when his body was not there? 'They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have put him.'

Sometimes our task is the same: to remember Jesus, his teachings, his example. But always our task is to proclaim the Jesus rose from the dead. He accepted death but he refused to stop living. He accepted the cross and he refused the crucifixion system.

He returned to be amongst his friends, bearing the wounds of crucifixion but also carrying the living spirit within him. Hungry to eat with us again, to feed us.

To say 'yes, I was crucified, but I am not ashamed'. 'I was killed but I am not dead'. 'I was dehumanized into nothing and I am myself.'

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

The symbol of shame now leads the victory lap. What was supposed to be buried, silent, forgotten, is now gathering all together. The word that once could not be spoken is now alive and aloud in myriad languages and infinite gestures across the world.

Our responsibility is to see the Risen Christ and tell others this great marvel. It can be hard to see the Risen Christ in this world. This world is trying hard to hide him. So seek him out, even in the place of death, even when your eyes fail you, even when you can only imagine giving honour to a corpse. Listen. He speaks your name.

I have seen the Living Christ. I see the resurrection, liberation power of Christ at work. In you. In creation. God's anointing is here, working in and through us, working to redeem and sanctify all things. Christ Jesus, through his incarnation and his resurrection, has made all things new. Has revealed that God was here all along. Has declared all of creation to be sacred and alive.

Christ is alive, and we follow him in faith and passion. Christ is alive and we witness to his living presence. Christ is alive and this is the first day, the new day, the day when we are made new and God once more calls us good.

What a time to be alive!