

Sermon TUMC - April 4, 2021 Easter Sunday

The power of resurrection

John 20: 1-18; Acts 10: 34-43

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I am very grateful to Carol Penner for writing that beautiful Zoom Easter Pageant and to Kathryn, Haven Klassen and Stephanie Hanna who organized that zoom pageant for us.

I'm curious about what stood out to you?

Maybe I'm overly sensitive to this, but for me it was the women in the story not being believed. Being treated like theirs was in idle tale. If we learn nothing else from this story, we should learn to believe people when they tell us what THEIR experience has been.

But the disciple Peter — expertly portrayed by David Hamm — also stood out. Especially Peter's mixed reaction to hearing the news that Jesus might be alive. And how his past actions came to haunt him.

It strikes me that what the kids in this imagined story didn't understand, and perhaps we don't either, is the deep grief and confusion that the disciples — all of them, men and women — were experiencing. Jesus' death was a gut wrenching moment for all of them. How could this have happened?

They were questioning their choices, going over the “what ifs.” What if we hadn't fallen asleep in Gethsemane? What if we had believed Jesus when he said he was going to die? What if we were on to Judas? What if we had strategized in a different way? What if I had told the truth about being with Jesus?

Think about how you might have felt if a friend betrayed your group's trust, like Judas did.

Or think about how you felt when a loved one died suddenly — remember the sobbing? the disorientation? The need to just try to do the next thing that needed to be done?

Or think of the punch in the gut of hearing (or watching) a grave and violent injustice, for example how just last year George Floyd died an innocent death at

the hands of the agents of the state, while crying out for his mother. Think of the helplessness of those who bore witness to this and could do nothing about it. And the aftermath of living in a world where such things still happen.

[Pause]

The disciples had barely taken in that Jesus had been betrayed, tortured and killed.

Then into this emotional mix comes a fantastical tale of an empty grave and an angel? What? What?

How does one make sense of a reversal like this? What does it mean? How is it possible?

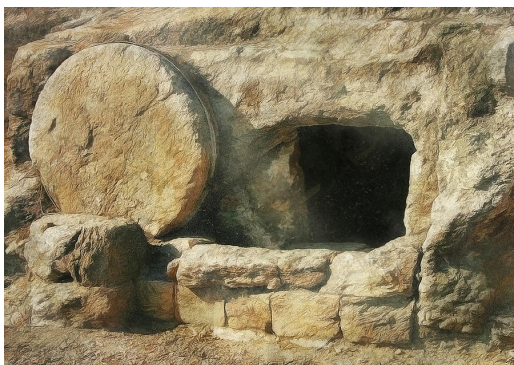
It went so fast they barely knew what had happened, they were still thinking on their feet. Caught up in the whirlwind of astonishment. They didn't know what to make of it.

Plus nobody actually saw the resurrection per se. The Gospels speak of an empty tomb and of Jesus' appearances, but the details are unclear. And so the disciples were left to try to make sense of whatever their experience had been, even as it was unfolding in the middle of their grief.

We too know of the events of the resurrection only through the witness of others.

Two thousand years later we are still trying to get our heads around this. Two thousand years of layers of doctrine and interpretation, and scientific skepticism have been added to the early disciples' experiences.

We've gone from their experience at an empty tomb to depictions like these:



Empty tomb



Jesus literally coming out of a sarcophagus from around the year 800



This copy of the Anastasis icon from the Byzantine Era, which adorns our church today. Where the Christ is trampling the chains of Hades (Death) and raising Adam and Eve with him, plus several other apostles and prophets, depending on which painting you look at.



This 15th century image of the Harrowing of Hell circulating on my twitter this week.¹

Perhaps we should stop trying so hard to get our *heads* around the resurrection. Maybe the reason the resurrection escapes depiction is that death becoming life is something inconceivably vast, something deep, something mystical, cosmic, unfolding in realms our intellects alone cannot fathom.

At the end of Jesus' bodily life, Christ expands back to being the divine energy, the *ruach*, the breath, that sustains the world. It's like the reverse of Christmas, if you think about it.

The disciples came to understand this as God's Holy Spirit, a force, a presence beyond ourselves that has the astounding power to transform, that breaks our categories and flips everything we thought we knew around. God's spirit that makes our lives about so much more than our eventual death.

If we look at the disciple Peter's experience, we can glimpse how that transformation can take place.

¹ (It is an illuminated miniature described as the Harrowing of Hell from a manuscript of "Meditationes vitae Christi" attributed to Bonaventure, possibly c. 1420 and now in the collection of the British Museum)

In the passage that Clara read to us, we find a very different Peter than the one denying Jesus by the fire pits outside of Pilate's headquarters. Here Peter has just had a vision of how God's favour goes beyond his own people. (It's that story about how a sheet comes down from heaven with animals on it — if you don't now that story check out the part in Acts leading up to this passage). He's talking now in this passage to a gentile a Roman Centurion Cornelius, who lives a life of prayer and charity. This was inconceivable to Peter. Peter's worldview is being drastically rearranged.

He was always that guy who tried so hard to get it right. Throughout his time as Jesus' disciple he'd jump to conclusions about what Jesus wanted from him and he almost always got it wrong.

At one point Peter argued with Jesus that he would NOT get killed, and Jesus rebuked him in the strongest terms saying "Get behind me Satan!" (Matthew 16:23). Ouch!

At another Peter brings out a sword to try to defend Jesus when he is about to be arrested. Peter goes so far as to cut off the high priest's servant's ear thinking he's being the bravest of all of Jesus' followers! (John 18:10) Jesus reprimands him again, while reattaching Malchius' ear.

And then while trying to be strategic about keeping an eye on Jesus during his trial, Peter finds himself denying he even knows Jesus. Just like that, so easily! Which he realizes to his great shame once the rooster crows.

Later, the resurrected Jesus will come and makes Peter (and the other disciples) some breakfast on the beach (John 21). And Jesus restores the relationship with him. Do you love me? Jesus asks three times. Do you love me? Until Peter can say it back fully assured that he has been forgiven for all his betrayals.

Transformation takes deep work. It takes time. And it is tended to by God's Spirit.

During the passage we heard just now, Peter finally articulates his "aha" moment and gives evidence of his holy change of heart. He says:

"It's God's own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favourites! It makes no difference who you are or where you're from—if you want God and are ready to do as [God] says, the door is open. The Message sent to the children of Israel —that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again— well, [God's] doing it everywhere, among everyone..." It's called forgiveness. [Adapted from The Message translation]

“If we are to learn from Peter's experience with the Holy Spirit, we should let go of our assumptions and live our lives aware that the Holy Spirit comes breathing new life into us pouring the good news into our lives and communities in ways that we cannot possibly anticipate.”²

And this is why the resurrection matters to us as well — in this second Easter of the pandemic, in another lockdown. It means, do not give up hope of transformation, we do not know what stage of transformation we are in, keep on doing the deep work that God is calling you to do.

I was trying really hard to get beyond the references to plant life that always make an appearance in my Easter sermons. But I can't, it's such a powerful image.

Notice how this mere little bean, illustrates the power of life at work in us and in the world. <https://youtu.be/w77zPAAtVTul>

Notice how much work, how much energy happens in the deep places. How much happens beyond what we can see.

Death becoming life is at the core of the cycles of our planet. Resurrection is the power beyond ourselves, God's power, the power that enables transformation and forgiveness. It creates deep transformation, spurs on spiritual growth. It is that power that is at work in us, for us, still; Hallelujah!

Will you be open to this resurrection?

² Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, pg. 373