

Resurrection: The Divine Erasure?

Second Sunday of Easter, April 19, 2009

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Texts: Acts 4.32-35,
Psalm 133,
1 John 1.1-2.2,
John 20. 19-31

Wouldn't you just love the opportunity to go back in time and re-write some of the moments of your life? It's hard to live with regret. Most of us would welcome the chance to use some divine erasure to re-write history and stop the relentless movement of time. When Christians begin talking about the resurrection, they can sometimes become tempted to think in those terms. Some see the resurrection as precisely that – the event that reverses the devastation of crucifixion. Just look at the contrast between the liturgies, the prayers and the hymns we sing on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday versus the ones you hear through this season of Easter. During Holy Week we give voice to themes of suffering and betrayal, disappointment and fear. Then on the day of Easter forward we make this dramatic shift to the language of resurrection. In our prayers and in our singing we celebrate the power of God that conquers death, defeats sin, and brings new life.

But as Gordon observed last week on Easter Sunday, it is a deep mystery how that day of resurrection can create that kind of shift in the world. As our text from John today makes clear the fact of Jesus' resurrection did not make some immediate, cataclysmic transformation even for his disciples. Even after the women report what they saw at the tomb, even after Mary speaks with Jesus herself, our text today begins with the disciples huddled in fear behind locked doors. Even after Jesus appears to them that night and breathes the Holy Spirit on them – a full week later – they were in the same place: behind closed doors. Did you notice that? Nothing changed for them even after seeing the resurrected Christ.

So how is it that we can claim - as churches around the world and throughout the centuries have done – that the power of resurrection can do all those things we can claim it can do? I suspect that is why the season of Eastertide is seven weeks long - longer than the season of Lent, in fact. We need this kind of time to wrestle with the implication and meaning of the mystery of that day. When we say the power of resurrection is the power

of God to heal and restore, to transform and bring new life, we do not mean that those things come in some magical, instantaneous way.

But something does change on the other side of this day of resurrection. Somehow this small circle of disciples move from being locked behind closed doors in fear (as we find them in John) to this early Christian community described today in the book of Acts: a whole group of those who believed who were of one heart and soul – filled with great power and grace – who were so generous that no one had a need among them. Isn't it interesting today to see these two texts side by side? If we want to understand what the mystery of the resurrection means and how it creates new life, it's helpful to pay close attention to these resurrection stories we find here because they describe how the early church made its way onto the trajectory we see in the book of Acts today.

The resurrection stories in each of the gospels have different details. If you were to line them up side by side to try to uncover what really happened you would not get very far. I suggest we read these stories today on their own terms uncovering the themes that were transformative for the early Christian community who preserved these stories as they made sense of Jesus' death and resurrection. They tell the stories the way they do based on the new life that unfolded for them after that first Easter day. John gives us three of these stories in his gospel and while we read one of those today, I want to look with you at all three.

First, I want to look back at last week's text at Mary who is the first to encounter the risen Christ in John's gospel. It's just after Peter and John have left the tomb and Mary is weeping when she sees Jesus. After he identifies himself, Jesus says to her in verse 17: "Do not hold on to me." The more literal rendering of this phrase in Greek might be: "stop clinging to me"¹. That word *clinging* gives a particular feeling to this exchange. Jesus understood that Mary was looking to go back in time before Jesus entered into Jerusalem and all of the events that lead up to his death. Even the name she calls him suggests her longing to re-establish the teacher-disciple relationship. She wanted things to be the way they had been before.

¹ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 102, offers that interpretation. The Greek phrase rendered *Do not touch me* in the NRSV is in the present imperative which means forbidding the continuation of an action already begun.

You can appreciate the attachment these disciples had to the life they shared with Jesus before his death. But, of course, God had other plans for them: plans to take this good news of the kingdom beyond the scope of Jesus' personal influence; beyond the kind of impact he could make disciple by disciple, crowd by crowd. There was a whole new life for them on the other side of Jesus' death. That new life for Mary began in the garden as Jesus profoundly disappointed her with his admonition: "Do not cling to me." Perhaps the Buddhists are on to something when they describe the core of suffering as coming from our attachments and expectations. Sometimes when we come praying for God's healing in our lives, longing for that divine erasure, what comes instead is the kind of healing that begins for Mary in this moment: the kind that shakes us free from our attachments to the past and our assumptions of how things should be.

But let's look further to the next scene John describes; the one we have read today. The new life offered to Thomas comes in a different way. Not an admonition to let go of what he seeks (as is the case with Mary) but rather an offer to receive precisely what it is he needs. Thomas got a bad rap in my estimation. It's true that he's rather stubborn in his refusal to believe that Jesus was alive. But what he demands is no different from what happened for the other disciples. When Jesus comes to them on that first night (vs. 20) he shows them his hands and his side. That's all that Thomas asks for. It causes me to wonder about Thomas and what might sit at the center of his "doubt." Maybe he is a man of reason who needed proof he could see with his eyes and touch with his hands. But I wonder whether it was deeper than intellectual questioning. I wonder whether he was driven by something more like self-protection not wanting to hope for something he wanted so very much to believe because he couldn't bear the disappointment of losing Jesus all over again if it were not true that he was alive.

Whatever it was when Jesus returned, he walked straight over to Thomas and gave him exactly what he needed in order to believe and trust again. This story says something to us about the nature of God and the way that God meets us in our doubt. Sometimes seasons of questioning can lead us into deeper and larger faith than the faith we held before our questions began. Jesus does not reprimand Thomas for asking for too much. We can come asking for anything as long as we trust God to be the one to decide what it is we truly need.

This is nowhere more evident than in the story of Peter's encounter with Jesus in John chapter 21 beginning at vs. 15. If any of us think we have some moments from our past we would just as soon erase, think about Peter. How many times do you suppose Peter replayed that scene in the courtyard through his mind? Can you imagine the shame that must wash over him every time he thinks of it? And now on the sea shore he has to look Jesus in the eyes again. If I were Peter I would want that moment to be over with quickly. But Jesus isn't interested in making things easy for Peter. So he puts a very simple but heart-piercing question to Peter: "Do you love me?" By the third time that Jesus asks him this you can hear the pleading underneath Peter's response: why are you doing this to me?

But Jesus understood better than Peter what he needed. He needed to be restored. Peter could never go back and erase what he had done but he could create this new moment with Jesus: looking him straight in the eyes as he declares his love and commitment in front of the other disciples - three times - one for every regrettable denial. This is what Susan Scott calls a *Fierce Conversation* in her book by that name.² Many of us avoid these difficult moments of confrontation. But what Scott argues in her book is that tending to these critical conversations can create a whole new trajectory that is not possible if these conversations are avoided. She notes that people will let their most important relationships and beloved organizations slowly deteriorate before they will tackle these risky conversations. She writes: "When you think of a fierce conversation think of passion, integrity, authenticity, collaboration...think transformation."³

What Jesus is doing in this conversation is moving Peter from being stuck in the past with his feelings of failure and regret and commissioning him for his future to feed and tend Jesus' sheep. Jesus was leaving again, and he had to go if they were to ever take up the mantle of their own calling. They were not meant to sit at Jesus' feet for the rest of their days as wonderful as those years together had been. They were to take up their own calling....find their own voice....to move from disciple and student to apostle and teacher. That's the real purpose behind the new life that God offers to us: to be free to live and love and serve without being preoccupied by suffering or grief or regret.

² Scott, Susan, *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life One Conversation at a Time*, (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 2002).

³ Scott, Susan, *Fierce Conversations*, p. xvii.

It's impossible to escape life without these things. We were discussing just this dynamic at our dinner for eight table last night. You get to a certain point in your life and it is inevitable that you will have some regrets - some place in your life or in your body that hurts - things you wish you could go back and do differently. That's the reality we all live with.

Perhaps these stories can be a starting place for us as we listen for the places where the Spirit of the Risen Christ is pushing us toward new life in our corner of the world. Where do we need to be shaken free (with Mary) from our attachment to the past or to our expectations about the way we think things should be? Where do we need to be bold (with Thomas) and press with our questions and doubts until we find the space where God meets us once again? Where are those fierce conversations we need to have (with Peter) in order to be set free from some part of our past?

Over the next six weeks of Eastertide,
I wonder what new pathways - what new life - might open up
 in your life,
 in mine,
 here at Hope church,
 or in our community
if we were to spend time with these questions
 and live with these stories
 letting the Spirit of the Risen Christ
 join with my spirit and your spirit
 connecting our spirits one to another...
I wonder what power and grace would be raised up in and among us?

For the Spirit of the Risen Christ is here. Alleluia! Amen.