

Practicing Resurrection

A Sermon Preached by the
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Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
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Acts 2:14a, 22-32
John 20:19-31

In most congregations, today is referred to as “low Sunday,” the Sunday after Easter when it feels strangely like the air has gone out of the balloon. Worship attendance usually takes an exhausted dip as visiting relatives go home, college students go back to school, and spring break ends. The chocolate bunnies and jellybeans have been eaten, and everybody’s tired of leftover ham. In other words, life gets back to normal.

Which, in a way, is too bad, because we are in Eastertide, the fifty days between Easter and Pentecost and this is the time of year when we get the post-resurrection appearance stories, which don’t seem normal to us at all! Last week, you may remember, we found Mary Magdalene in the garden, weeping because the body had been taken away, and she didn’t recognize Jesus when he appeared. And today’s Gospel lesson, when Jesus apparently walks through walls into an upper room where his disciples are hiding behind locked doors, and again a week later to convince Thomas of his continued presence among them.

Next week we’ll be on the road to Emmaus with two disciples who invite a stranger to dinner and don’t recognize Jesus until the bread is broken and their eyes are opened. And in Matthew, after an encounter with an angel outside an empty tomb, who reminds them that Jesus said he would go ahead of them to Galilee, the disciples go to Galilee where they meet Jesus on a mountaintop. In other words, life is anything but normal!

But when we begin today, the joy of seeing or experiencing Jesus has yet to come. The disciples have locked themselves into a room, fearing that if they are discovered, they, too, will meet the same fate that Jesus did. Given that the Gospel writer makes it sound like they have no intention of coming out any time soon, my guess is that their fear goes much deeper than just being found out as followers of Jesus. This is more like the overwhelming fear that comes with despair and hopelessness and shame. When we are ashamed, we hide behind all kinds of closed doors. Perhaps the disciples are ashamed because they failed to protect Jesus from the authorities, that they didn’t step up to the plate when their number was called; at least one of them had denied ever knowing Jesus, and another betrayed him into the hands of those who would put him to death. There’s plenty of guilt and despair and hopelessness to go around, and more than enough fear to keep the disciples locked inside of it for a long time.

So let’s talk a little about fear and the stranglehold it can have on people’s lives. We don’t use the term “paralyzed with fear” without reason.

None of us, finally, makes it to the end without having to stare into the face of our worst fears. I can’t name yours, I can only name my own. For some, it will be a

debilitating illness, the fear of dying more than the fear of death itself. In a world where AIDS and cancer and heart disease and Alzheimer's are still going largely uncured – treatable, but often incurable – all of us face the very real threat of being stricken with an illness that will mean a dying that we would not choose.

For others, it is the fear of living daily with the threat of a terrorist attack, of dodging bullets on the way to the marketplace, of never making it to safety – if, indeed, there is a safe place. Ceasefires give way to renewed violence in the blink of an eye these days. It is the fear of being caught in the crossfire of gang violence. It is the fear that your child, sitting at the kitchen table doing her homework, will be killed by a stray bullet from the gunfire that erupts outside on an all too regular basis.

Others live in fear of violence closer to home. In what should be the safety of one's home, domestic abuse seems to have reached epidemic proportions in this country. At a more basic level, we fear growing older, losing our independence, living alone, dying alone. We fear losing a spouse or partner or parent or child. Our worst nightmares sometimes come true. We can't hide from our fears for very long. For years we had a sign hanging in our kitchen that said, "Some days the dragon wins," which seemed to say it all.

And some fight personal demons of depression and despair, addiction and shame, and the fears that come with them. Pastor Craig Barnes, writing about this text a couple of years ago in the *Christian Century* said, "Like the disciples, we try to hide when we're ashamed. We keep our hearts locked up tightly because we know the truth about ourselves, and the truth is that we are not what we want to be, or even what we pretend to be." He goes on to say, "Garrison Keillor said, 'We always have a backstage view of ourselves.'" Barnes says, "We let the audience see only the neatly arranged stage. But behind the curtain all kinds of things are lying around: old failures, hurts, guilt and shame. . . and nothing is more crippling to our souls than working at hiding shame. We lock up more and more doors, sealing off more and more rooms of the heart to prevent our true selves from being discovered. We think we are keeping the world out, but in fact we are keeping ourselves locked in."¹

A couple of years ago, I went to a workshop on recovering self-worth. The speaker helped us think through the difference between what is called "discretionary shame" and "disgrace shame." He defined disgrace shame as "a violation of one's sense of worth and value resulting in feeling unlovable and unacceptable. (It is) linked to being." In other words, it's the difference between saying, "I've done something wrong," and "I'm a bad person."

It's that disgrace shame that keeps us locked up and terrified of the unknown response that could devastate a relationship, prompt the loss of a job, or worse.

But then there is this. Tucked into the Gospel lesson for today are these words, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." I think that includes forgiving ourselves and unlocking the doors of self-imprisonment. Writer Lewis Smedes has said, "When you forgive you set a prisoner free. And then you discover that the prisoner was you." Or as someone else put it, not doing so "is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die."

¹ M. Craig Barnes, "Crying Shame," *Christian Century*, April 6, 2004, p.19.

The Gnostic Gospel of Thomas has a somewhat different take on it. In the Gospel of Thomas Jesus says, “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.” Craig Barnes reminds us that, “It doesn’t matter what you do, or how hard you try – you are never going to have a better past.”²

The disciples knew that, or figured it out somewhere, sometime in that upper room. They knew that nothing was going to change what had happened, that the Jesus that they followed was really dead, and if they were going to do what he asked them to do, they were going to have to let go of the past, open the door and live into a future that was unknown and frightening. Did Jesus really appear in that upper room? Or on the road to Emmaus? Or on the shore at daybreak? Or on the mountain outside of Galilee? It doesn’t really matter. What matters is that the disciples found a way to practice resurrection. We know they eventually found their way out of that upper room, believing themselves, as we believe ourselves, called to open the locks and throw open the door and walk back into the world no matter how scary things look from the inside. Think about the story this morning from the Book of Acts, where we find Peter – Peter, of all people! – standing in front of a crowd preaching the resurrection.

I’ve always loved the story that the late, great columnist Molly Ivins told at the Minneapolis Woman’s Club years ago. She opened her remarks with this story about her childhood friend John Henry Faulks. When John Henry was a little boy, he and his friend Boots were, as Molly put it, “in law enforcement.” In other words, like many little boys in Texas, they spent many happy hours pretending to be Texas Rangers. One hot summer afternoon, Mrs. Faulks, noticing that she had two law enforcement officers right there in her own front yard, called the boys over to the porch and said, “Boys, I want you to ride on down to the hen house and see if you can’t get rid of that chicken snake that’s been eatin’ all the eggs.” Molly Ivins reported that she had never been nose to nose with a chicken snake, but that John Henry claimed that they will just scare the wits right out of you. Anyway, the boys mounted up their broomsticks and rode out to the hen house. They tethered the broomsticks outside and sneaked into the hen house to look for that old chicken snake. They couldn’t see anything down below, so they both climbed up a little bit and peeked into the nests on the top roost. Sure enough, they came face to face with the chicken snake. Now in the effort to escape, they did considerable damage to the door of the chicken house, not to mention each other and themselves, with scrapes and bruises on their arms and legs. Mrs. Faulks was watching this whole event from the front porch, and when the boys galloped back up she said, “Now boys, you know perfectly well that a chicken snake won’t hurt you.” And Boots replied, “Yes ma’am, but there are some things that will scare you so bad, you hurt yourself.” It’s a question worth thinking about – what are those things that scare us so bad that we hurt ourselves?

I believe that the stories of these post-resurrection appearances were told and written down for a reason. Something happened to the disciples in the days and weeks after Jesus’ death. Whatever it was, however it happened, “they experienced the most essential part of Jesus’ presence as still with them after his death.”³ Whatever it was,

² Ibid.

³ Walter Wink, “Resonating with God’s Song,” *Christian Century*, March 23, 1994, p.309.

however it happened, it moved them beyond the locked-in fear, beyond the shame of failure, of somehow being inadequate, into an entirely different future – not necessarily a future without fear, but certainly a future in which they lived and worked and loved as followers of Jesus, a future in which they practiced resurrection.

Last week, Easter, I told you what I thought resurrection looked like, and talked about some of the places and people that I thought were living the resurrection. Well, the thing about living the resurrection is that it takes practice. It's like playing a musical instrument or learning a different language; if you don't practice every day, you soon lose the ability to play that sonata or converse in Italian. Even with practice, it may not seem to get any easier. And there will be days when all the practice in the world can't seem to lift the fear and despair and hopelessness. But then there's Easter.

So hear these words from one commentary on this text: "Whenever we're afraid and hiding out, all locked up, God comes to us in the midst of our fear and says, 'Peace be with you.' Whatever doubts churn in our minds, whatever sins trouble our consciences, whatever pain and worry bind us up, whatever walls we have put up or doors we have locked securely, God comes to us and says, 'Peace be with you.' Whatever hunger and need we feel deep in our souls, God calls us to the table, feeds us well, and sends us out into the world to be justice and peace, salt and light, hope for the world."⁴

Another writer has said, "Here is the agenda for the post-Easter journey – joy and peace, mission and forgiveness, faith and proclamation, love and life. Certainly enough to keep (us) busy until next year."⁵ I would add that before we can even begin the journey, we need to unlock the door and find out what it's like to practice resurrection – in our personal lives, in the wider world, and right here at Oak Grove. More about that as we continue to travel through Eastertide to Pentecost, so stay tuned! Amen.

⁴ S.A.M.U.E.L.: Scripture and Mission: A UCC Electronic Library, March 30, 2008.

⁵ Stanley Harakas, "Now What?" *Christian Century*, March 19-26, 1997, p. 291.