

Our Resurrection Community

1 John 3:1-7 Luke 24:36b-48
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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For those of you who were here in person for our Easter Sunday service of worship in the church parking lot, or watching live or later on our YouTube channel, you may have noticed what I *didn't* say in my sermon. What I didn't say or do is make any reference concerning whether the stories of the empty tomb should be interpreted literally or metaphorically – an issue I've explored in most every previous Easter sermon. I want to mention today, therefore, that no matter where you or I stand on affirming the literalness (or not) of the Resurrection event itself, these gospel stories point to an undeniable significance in understanding one of the most basic premises that undergirds all of Christianity.

As we all know, it's easy to get bogged down in sometimes divisive discussions about biblical interpretations and theological understandings of the Resurrection. While I actually enjoy such lively conversations, what all of us must never forget is **the importance of exploring the practical and ethical implications revealed and embedded in these stories**. Several years ago, our Adult Church School class spent a few months exploring and discussing a progressive Christianity curriculum, 'Living the Questions', *Saving Jesus Redux*. It was then when many of us were first introduced to the term, "**practicing resurrection**". That sounded very strange at first. Most of us simply think of the Resurrection as some kind of ancient experience in the lives of Jesus' first disciples. But to practice resurrection is to bring its implications into our own lives.

Rather than being understood as our ticket into heaven in the hereafter, Resurrection becomes a calling for us to put into action now what it means to be Easter people. That curriculum states:

The real power of the Resurrection comes when the followers of Jesus become the body of Christ in the world, striving to bring new life to the world, to eradicate injustice, poverty, and violence.

In both the society at large and in people's personal lives: the practice of resurrection is about otherwise "dead" people being inwardly transformed and empowered to transform society.

Notice the emphasis on transformation. So, I ask: How has your faith helped transform your life? Your relationships? The life of this community of faith? Society itself? In and through these ancient stories of Jesus' Resurrection come **real and concrete promises that indeed find evidence in our own reality: promises of hope, new life, and yes, transformation**. I have no doubt that the Sacred Presence of Christ was very real to those first disciples, and that the same spiritual Presence is real in the church today, as well as within each of us. By whatever means Christ was made real after Jesus' crucifixion, the followers of Jesus were undoubtedly transformed into a courageous, caring, and prophetic community.

One of the mysteries of Easter is that **a community of faith can be empowered and transformed, along with its individual members, that includes you and me.** The scriptures give evidence to various kinds of transformation. We see this evidence of the Spirit's work in the lives of individuals and communities of faith today.

- Transformed from fear to courage.
- Transformed from feelings of hate and resentment to love and forgiveness;
- Transformed from a sense of worthlessness to understanding oneself as a valued, blessed, and beloved child of God.
- Transformed from hostility to a community of genuine hospitality.

The New Testament reveals that perhaps the most important and powerful witness to the resurrection took the form of a community of faith in which people cared deeply for each other, and took care of one another. In such a community, people transcended their differences – including the seemingly insurmountable barriers of culture, social status, religious backgrounds, and yes even race, in order to:

- live together in unity, though not uniformity,
- demonstrate their love for one another, and
- make sure that no one was left alone in their time of need.

That is the kind of community that changed the world. That is the kind of community in whose heritage we stand. Speaking frankly, however, I believe the wider church today has a problem communicating this message of love and redemption because the church itself so often appears neither loving nor redeemed. Instead, organized religion is now perceived by a near majority in this country as being exclusive, inhospitable, judgmental, unwilling to change to address the pressing issues of our day, and therefore, perhaps worst of all, irrelevant. A crucial element of our ministry efforts here at College Hill, therefore, is to help change that perception as we bear witness to the love and compassion and inclusion that we have for one another. That involves, in part, the forgiveness and reconciliation that we offer to each other when we feel we have been wronged. That extends beyond ourselves within this particular congregation, to include the Interfaith community.

How well do we extend that love, compassion, and inclusion to our fellow Presbyterian congregations, to other Christian denominations, to other faith traditions, and to those who claim no faith tradition? Perhaps it is in and through the acknowledgment of our diversity, our differences of opinion, our strengths and weaknesses, that we can recognize that as a resurrection community we are called to be a *loving* and *forgiving* community. Paul Boese has a quote that I recently discovered that is very helpful concerning forgiveness, "**Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future.**" That's part of what it means to practice resurrection. Accomplishing that means stretching beyond even our own understanding of what it means to be inclusive.

As today's Epistle reading from 1 John 3 reminds us, as children of God we are *all* part of God's family. And yes, **I confess, I am among those (like some of you) who have a very hard time extending that love, forgiveness, and inclusion as God's children to those committed, for one example, to white supremacy, superiority, and privilege – in all its manifest forms, socially and politically.** But that scripture passage also reminds us that every one of you play an important and unique role in helping our community of

faith to be all it can become. We need you and your commitment. Therefore, we strive to be a community of faith where:

- the strong minister to the weak;
- the assured to the doubting;
- the calm to the angered;
- the healthy to the sick –
- all knowing full well that at some point in the future situations will reverse themselves in that those currently *receiving* ministry will need to *offer* it to others, and those who have been *offering* ministry will be in need of *receiving* ministry.

The real “proof” of the Resurrection, therefore, isn’t found by any verifiable scientific evidence. Rather, it is found in how we minister to, care for, and treat one another – both within this community of faith, within our families (both biological and chosen), and with those we interact with each and every day. During this past year of being physically distanced from one another due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems that some of these ministry opportunities have been put somewhat on hold. Yet, as month after month after month went by, we've all **learned new ways of what it means to be present with others without needing to be in person with others.**

May we continue to reach out and practice resurrection even now as we get closer to that time when we will gather again in person in this sanctuary month on May 9. (And yes, for the time being there will be many precautions put in place for everyone’s safety in our Phase 1 re-union.)

So, I leave you with this charge: Live into the promises revealed in the mystery of the resurrection: Hope. New life. Transformation. For in doing so, we bear witness to the Sacred Presence in our midst, and especially in these times of continuing transition. That is how practicing resurrection becomes a reality for us, as we live out what it means to be an inclusive, forgiving, hospitable, and loving community of faith.

Amen.