

Resurrection is Reflected in Community

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

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
April 19, 2015

A couple of weeks ago, on Easter Sunday, I basically stated that while the resurrection stories themselves need not be interpreted as literally history, they should nonetheless be taken very seriously. That's why we continue to talk about the importance of the meaning behind these stories, and then try to understand how they can be applied to our own time and place.

Since today's assigned lectionary Gospel reading from Luke 24 is similar in many ways to last Sunday's lectionary reading from the Gospel of John (the "Doubting Thomas" story), I want use this occasion to address a few more things concerning the meaning of Easter and the resurrection. But this time, more from a practical standpoint than from a theological perspective. A more "What difference does it all make?" point of view.

Like with the Easter story itself, a story like today's Gospel reading needs to be looked at through the lens: **What is the primary point is the author trying to make?** This passage is a post-resurrection story of Jesus appearing to his disciples after he had risen from the dead, stating that he is not a ghost but flesh and bones. And to prove it, after showing them his hands and his feet, Jesus actually eats a piece of broiled fish.

A literally understanding of this story, as if it happened in a way that could be captured on a smart phone video, is considered by many Christians as "proof" that the physical bodily resurrection of Jesus was indeed a literal historical event. While I maintain anyone's right to interpret this story literally, I also maintain the right of those who choose to interpret it metaphorically. Here's the bottom line as far as I'm concerned: **The resurrection is not subject to empirical proofs or rational verification.** I caution you about anyone who would demand you believe otherwise.

Out of that mystery, however, come real and concrete promises that find evidence in reality: promises of hope, transformation, and new life. These promises have been, and continue to be, experienced in the lives of countless people and in the life of the greater church. I have no doubt that the presence of Christ was real to those first disciples, and that the presence of Christ is real in the church today. **By whatever means Christ was made real after Jesus' crucifixion, the followers of Jesus were transformed into a courageous and prophetic community. They bore witness to the very real opportunity transformation – a life of hope lived in and through a new life.**

One of the mysteries of Easter, then, is that a community of faith can be empowered, and that, along with its individual members, it can be transformed. The scriptures give evidence to various kinds of transformation. We see this evidence 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.

How do we, then, as College Hill Presbyterian Church, and as individual members, bear witness to hope, transformation and new life? 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 differences of culture, social status, religious backgrounds, and even race – in order to live together in unity, and to 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.

Historically, the non-Christian world listened to the message of the early Christian community because the world saw in the lives of those Christians a distinct love for one another, and a unique unity that transcended boundaries. 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. Therefore, a crucial element of our ministry is to help change that perception** as we bear witness to the love and compassion that we have for one another, and for the forgiveness and reconciliation that we offer to each other when we feel we have been wronged. That includes not only within this particular congregation, but also must be extended to our fellow Presbyterian congregations, with other Christian denominations, and also with other faith traditions.

Through all our own diversity, differences of opinion, strengths and weaknesses, we must recognize that as a resurrection community we are called to be a **forgiving community. Accomplishing that means stretching beyond even our own understanding of what it means to be inclusive.**

Building and deepening our relationships with each other here at College Hill, as I have mentioned on countless occasions, must always be among our top priorities as a family of faith. Some of the best ways we can do that is not only through a shared experience of worship, but also through active participation in the many fellowship opportunities that are offered, as well as in Christian Education classes, occasions of service to others, and congregational care in general.

As today's Epistle reading from 1 John 3 reminds us, as children of God we are all part of God's family. Therefore, each and every one of you play an important and unique role in helping our community of faith to be all it can become. What are the implications of all this? Dr. C. Welton Gaddy, pastor of Northminster Church in Monroe, Louisiana, puts the meaning and role of a resurrection community into perspective this way:

Culture presents a problem to the church. **Culture is about me:** my wants, my ideas, my wishes, my plans – do it my way or not at all. **Church is about community,** compassion, acceptance, forgiveness, and ministry – acting together in the name of Christ.

Culture prizes an individualistic consumer economy. Church pursues a community of sharing in which individual possessions are the means for meeting needs throughout society.

A **community of the resurrection** embodies the spirit and compassion of the resurrected Christ, accepting within it persons at all stages of spiritual development, emotional health, and physical sufficiency. 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 the situation will likely change and those *receiving* ministry will need to minister, because 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 scientific evidence. Rather, it is found in how we minister to and treat one another. That includes not only here within this particular family of faith, but also in how we minister to and treat the people that we come in contact with on a daily basis – including those who believe and behave differently from ourselves.

So I leave you with this charge:

Live into the promises revealed in the mystery of the resurrection: Hope. Transformation. New life. For in doing so, we bear witness to the Divine presence in our midst. It is that Presence that redeems us, blesses us, and sends us out. **That is how the resurrection becomes a reality for us, as a reflection within and among our sense of authentic and caring community.**

Amen.