

A People of Hope

Easter Sunday

Luke 24:1-12
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
March 31, 2024

On this Easter Sunday, I want to begin with a couple of quotes concerning the importance of the resurrection stories. Here's the first one:

The subject of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth lies at the foundation of Christianity itself. It was the experience that came to be called Easter that propelled the Christian movement into history. I still assert with deep conviction that my understanding of Christianity is rooted firmly in the reality of Easter. I do maintain...that the effects of that experience called Easter are demonstrably objective and real.

Here's the second quote:

For me, the historical ground of Easter is very simple: **the followers of Jesus, both then and now, continued to experience Jesus as a living reality after his death...** Thus I see the post-Easter Jesus as an experiential reality. Christians throughout the centuries have continued to experience Jesus as a living spiritual reality, a figure of the present, not simply a memory from the past. The truth of Easter is grounded in these experiences.

The first quote, some of you may be surprised, is from **John Shelby Spong**, the second from **Marcus Borg**, who were both members of the Jesus Seminar, and decidedly on the progressive end of the theological spectrum. Therefore, no matter where you or I find ourselves along that spectrum, the fact remains that **there would be no Christianity today without that initial and continuing experience of the ongoing Presence of Christ after Jesus' death.**

While it's true that each of the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, vary – sometimes significantly – in their accounts of the empty tomb, the real question isn't which one is "correct", or even trying to fit them all together, but rather, what do these resurrection stories mean? It's the question that we should ask of every biblical story: **What is the truth to which these stories point?** Also, what relevance does Easter have in the life, mission, and ministry of the Christian church today, and in our own lives and journeys of faith?

By the grace of God, then, let us give ourselves permission to realize that **the stories of the resurrection can never be fully understood by the rational mind, or described by any dogma to which we must give our intellectual assent.** This is an occasion when I reflect upon one of my most life changing instructions during seminary, **"Let the mystery return."** Let us simply take refuge in the stories themselves so that they may be a source of transformation in our own lives, and in society today.

The resource material from **A Sanctified Art** that we have been using as a guide throughout the season of Lent, and will continue through next Sunday, reminds us, **“Our comprehension of the resurrection is not based on cerebral understanding, but on our ability to embrace awe and to let it transform us from the inside out.”** Resource biblical commentator, Dr. Karoline Lewis states, “The resurrection only makes sense when we remain amazed, marveling and wondering at the love of God... **We are not asked to explain the resurrection, offer proof for the resurrection, or make a case for the resurrection. Instead, like Peter, we live in wonder – for how belief in the God of resurrection truly can change the world.**”

Since she mentions Peter, let's look at his role in this story as recorded in the Gospel of Luke. When the women return from witnessing the empty tomb, after being reminded of Jesus' assurances, the disciples downright dismiss their words as **“an idle tale.”** A more literal and intense translation of the Greek word used here is **“garbage”**. The ones who were closest to Jesus basically respond to the women, “yeah, well, that's a bunch of rubbish.” Believe me, there's an entirely different and important sermon when it comes to addressing how **women throughout history have been all-too-easily dismissed by a patriarchal culture and society, including ours today.**

And yet, there was Peter's response. He's the only one, in Luke's account, who gets up and runs to the tomb to see for himself. His action can be interpreted this way, **Peter ran toward hope.** Did Peter run to the tomb because he believes or because he doubts? We don't know, and ultimately it doesn't matter why he goes, for **it is his hopeful spirit that drives him there.** And upon seeing, he is filled with amazement. Dr. Lewis writes, “‘Could it really be true?’ is the question I think Peter asked himself, and with hope on his heels, he ran to the tomb to see for himself. Peter goes home wondering and it's in that wondering that the meaning of the resurrection lies.” Peter experienced resurrection, and it transformed his life.

As we've been studying Peter throughout Lent, we learn of the highs and lows of his faith, to which many of us can relate. When Jesus was being arrested, he drew his sword. He then denied knowing Jesus three times. He wasn't even present as Jesus was being crucified. However – and this is an important however – Peter also ran to the tomb. **Peter is an exemplar of second chances. Peter shows us that there is always an opportunity to begin again. I encourage you on this Easter Sunday, therefore, to reflect upon the 2nd chances you've experienced in your life. How have you been able to begin again,** especially after an experience of heartbreak, or grief, or disappointment, or even failure?

Part of the experience of Easter is recognizing that we have a gracious God of 2nd chances and new beginnings. **Reflect on how you – and we together as a community of faith – run toward hope, like Peter, or at least to move in the direction of hope.** Perhaps you have witnessed someone else in your life leaning into hope beyond hope.

Resurrection offers the promise of hope, but again, not just for hereafter, but for the here and now, as well. As followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus, we are called to be a people of hope. On a cosmic scale, for many, the story of the resurrection points to a time of triumph over all the powers of tyranny, oppression, domination, injustice, and death. It promises that the ways of God, the ways of love, will ultimately prevail over all the attitudes, behaviors, and systems opposed to God and the ways and teachings of Jesus. Clinging to that hope for the future has been a

powerful source of inspiration, courage, perseverance, and action for countless people throughout the ages, including us today.

Jesus announced that the kin-dom of God is not only near, but has already begun. That, in and of itself, is a source of remarkable hope to which we also cling.

On a more individual level, I summarize **the promise of hope** in the resurrection story during memorial services this way. **Death does not have the final word. There is life beyond this life, whatever that may be like, and it is lived eternally in the loving and Sacred Presence of God.** The promise of Easter, then, makes it possible to experience a sense of comfort, peace, and hope even in the midst of our sorrow and grief. As John Shelby Spong concludes:

I peer beyond the limits in which my life is lived, and I say my prayerful yes...

Yes to Jesus - my primary window into God;

Yes to resurrection - which asserts that the essence of Jesus is the essence of a living God;

Yes to life after death - because one who has entered a relationship with God has entered the timelessness of God."

Easter is both God's YES to us and to the world God created, and our YES to God. Let us live into what it means to be a people of hope!

Happy Easter and Amen.

Resources:

A Sanctified Art, *Wandering Heart: Figuring out faith with Peter*, Lent 2024.