

“Atonement and the end of dualism in Galilee,” 10/19/06
Candidate sermon before the Presbytery of Middle TN
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Mark 16:1-7

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another: “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed: you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”

Ephesians 2:14-15

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

Sequence 1:

The men have fled. So they come alone. The two Marys and Salome come alone to anoint Jesus' crucified body. They ask themselves, who will roll away for us the huge burial stone?

50 years later, the house church at Ephesus is conflicted over whether the Christian Jews should work beside the Christian Greeks. It appears the Greeks do not follow the law of Leviticus. The law-loving Christian Jews are quick to point to the partitioning wall between the court of the Gentiles and the inner sanctum of the Jerusalem temple. The Greeks hunger and thirst for full fellowship with the Jews.

When you ask if I am hungry, we all know what you are really asking is if I feel like entertaining my mouth. I have rarely gone for 24 hours without food. Thirsty?

Bottled water is as close as my refrigerator. But sometimes, in times past, I have felt alone in my spiritual hunger and thirst.

Several thousand miles south of us, no one eats more than one meal a day, if that. Because there is not enough to go around. And water? Every year they have 6 months of flooding and 6 months of drought. So drinking water comes from the same stagnant pond in which the pigs bathe. And a thirteen year old boy dies of seizures due to a parasitic infection in his brain. The Kekchi aboriginals of Guatemala think the 1st world, that is, you and I, have forgotten about them. They feel so alone in their hunger and thirst.

At the tomb, in Ephesus, in Guatemala, and in Middle TN there is loneliness. But loneliness leads to another even more troubling emotion.

Sequence 2:

The two Marys and Salome come to the tomb alone. The men have fled for fear of being crucified themselves. When they encounter the empty tomb, they themselves are afraid. What does the empty tomb mean?

The letter to the Ephesians describes a partitioning wall between the Jews and Gentiles. Those who follow the law of Leviticus and those who do not. A wall made of the law. Gentiles cross the wall in the temple, the one separating their court from the rest of the temple, only under the fear of death.

In an unarticulated way, you are afraid of the Kekchi aboriginals. You hear they are a foot shorter, have red-brown skin, and none of them speak English. Why, most of them don't even speak Spanish.

Several thousand miles south of us in Guatemala, the indigenous Kekchi are afraid of us gringos. We are a foot taller, have different color skin, and talk funny. None of us speak Kekchi. Why, most of us don't even speak Spanish.

At the tomb, in Ephesus, in Guatemala, and in Middle TN we are all afraid. And all this loneliness and fear beget yet another emotion.

Sequence 3:

Jesus is crucified. How can this be Good News? After all, the letter to the Ephesians tells us that without Christ, there is no hope.

Concern over medical illness, job security, stressed inter personal relationships, or personal loneliness, crowd in around and oppress us. Sometimes we lose hope. Sometimes we are tempted to think God might not love us. We find we cannot pick ourselves up by our bootstraps. We need help.

The Kekchi have been persecuted for decades by their own government. They experience genocide on a level our news stations never report. Just because coffee, sugar cane, and bananas can be grown on the land on which they live. The Kekchi are oppressed. They need help.

In rural TN, the words "help" and "hope" seem to have the same meaning. Yesterday, a man dying of cancer came to my office. His wife said her husband needed some hope. She said she wanted me to "hope" him.

At the cross, in Ephesus, in Guatemala, and in Middle TN we all experience loss of hope. We worry there is no one to "hope" us. But Mark and the letter to the Ephesians tell us there is.

Sequence 4:

When the two Marys and Salome arrive at the tomb, the stone separating them from Jesus has already been rolled away, and they are advised by the man in the tomb to, “Be not alarmed. He has been raised; he is not here. He is going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him.”

What does it mean that Jesus has gone ahead of them to Galilee? Some feel this is a reference to the Galilee of the Gentiles; that Jesus is found in what for the Jew is the face of the Gentile, in what for you and I is the face of the stranger. Others feel Galilee metaphorically represents the oppressed and impoverished of society. It is in Galilee, the symbol of the place of the poor and the despised, that the risen Jesus is found. One scholar writes, disciples of the risen Jesus will find him as they take up their ministry in the “Galilees” of history. Is Guatemala a “Galilee” of history? Is the Gulf Coast? Is the Campus for Human Development, where you pick up the homeless for Room in the Inn? In the aftermath of the tornadoes, are Hendersonville and Gallatin Galilees of history? Is Eastminster’s Hispanic ministry? Do you see Jesus in the face of the homeless at Downtown Presbyterian’s soup kitchen?

The letter to the Ephesians tells us Jesus replaces our loneliness with love, our fear with trust, and our hopelessness with peace and joy. Jesus breaks down the dividing wall, reconciling both groups to God in the one body of Christ. The "once far off is brought near." In Jesus, both groups are united into one. No longer strangers and aliens, we are now all members of the household of God, with Jesus himself the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together by Jesus and grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

In the Galilees of history, we look for Jesus. Jesus who tumbles down the walls of loneliness, fear, and hopelessness. Walls which formerly separated us from God and from each other.

Conclusion

Jesus has gone ahead of us to Galilee. I propose to you today that we are closest to Jesus not in the comfort of our home, but in the Galilees of history. That the salvation which we seek is found not in a mirror, but in the face of the needy and the oppressed.

The Good News in today's scripture is that Jesus atones in a very concrete way. We are atoned through Jesus' incarnation, ministry, death at the hands of oppressors, and resurrection by God. We are atoned by Jesus, who is the trumpet blast that tumbles down the walls which divide us. When the walls are gone, we can finally both *see Jesus in*, and *be Jesus to*, those who are not like us. The Good News is that no one is beyond the power of God's redemption and reconciliation. Absolutely no one.