

Easter Sunday

3/23/08

John 20: 11-18

“Things worse than death”

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Introduction

First century Christians said to each other on Easter Morning, “Jesus is risen!” To which they responded, “He is risen indeed!” Lets try that now. Jesus is risen! ...

Teachers tell us we all have different learning styles. Some of us learn best by listening. Some of us learn best by seeing. Or, like doubting Thomas, who had to put his hands in Jesus’ wounds: some of us learn best by touching. We all learn differently. I believe we all also have different theological styles. Some of us integrate messages better if couched in traditional theological genres. Some of us integrate better if messages are couched in a Jeffersonian genre. Thomas Jefferson as you remember rewrote the Bible, cutting all the miracles out of it, because they did not make sense to him. But there is another way. A way that takes the “How” out of the conversation, and replaces it with “Why” and “So what” questions.

Many witnessed the crucifixion, but no one witnessed the resurrection. No one was there when it happened. What we call “resurrection stories” are not really accounts of the resurrection, but instead are accounts of the risen Jesus. You see, Christian faith is not faith in the empty tomb, but in the risen Jesus.

What I am trying to say here is that faith in the resurrection of Jesus is not reducible to the claim that the corpse of Jesus was resuscitated. Conversation about HOW it happened can so preoccupy us that the question of WHY the resurrection is good news almost disappears.

One thing is clear about the resurrection. It happened in THIS world. So for Jesus himself, and for us, that means the resurrection is about RENEWAL of human life, not ESCAPE from it. The resurrection in other words, is not ONLY about what happens to us after we die and leave this world, it is ALSO about our lives in the here and now.

Along this line of thinking, I propose some things are worse than death. Like the trinity of brokenness, isolation, and fear. Let me repeat. Some things are worse than death, like the trinity of brokenness, isolation, and fear. But God responds to the dark nights of the soul, the Black Fridays in our life, with the creativity of Easter morning. And the creativity of Easter morning is this: God moves us from brokenness into wholeness, from isolation into relationship, and from fear into confidence and generosity.

Movement 1: The Resurrection Heals Our Brokenness

We do MEAN things to ourselves and to each other. The newspaper any day of the week will confirm this. We are broken. And we sometimes we are even ashamed. How did we get that way, you might ask? One factor is the hormones that cause fight or flight. They were useful once upon a time, and some may say they are still useful. Think about when they are useful: primarily when we inflict or defend against violence. I am convinced the Good News about conflict is this: We can resolve conflict without violence. However, the hormones which cause fight or flight remain, and sometimes we have trouble dampening them down.

Another factor is our culture. We are influenced by our nurture, our culture. A culture that promotes narcissism, objectification of women, intoxication, and yes, violence. A culture that polarizes us into factions. Institutionalized brokenness.

Sigmund Freud says there are only two influences upon us, nature and nurture, and both conspire to cause brokenness.

I remind you of the first verse in today's Gospel reading: "Mary stood weeping outside the tomb."

How do we move from brokenness to wholeness, if we get so little help from nature or nurture? As we have discussed in previous weeks, Freud is wrong about there being only two influences upon our decisions. There is a third influence.

God. God's resurrection of Jesus shows us that no brokenness is beyond the power of God's redemption.

About 7 years ago, a medical office I know hired an employee with a drug problem.

I do not know if they knew that at the time she was hired. But she had a relapse during her employment. I do not know how it was manifest. If it was tardiness to work. Or falling asleep during work hours. Or rudeness to fellow employees or patients. Or sloppiness. I do not know how her relapse was manifest, but I heard it was obvious. Most offices would have written her off. Most people addicted to drugs would have written themselves off. But the office I am referring to was influenced by the power of the resurrection. By the resurrection which shows us no brokenness is beyond the power of God's redemption. This office decided to give her a second chance. They told her if she would take 6 weeks of drug rehab, and agree to have weekly blood tests, they would keep her job open, and hire her back. Influenced by the power of the resurrection, she decided to give herself a second chance. That was 7 years ago, and she still works for them.

Scripture tells us that God heals our brokenness. First, God frees us from the shame of yesterday. Then God frees us from our chains of nature and nurture. So we can make choices not dictated by them. To make choices that promote wholeness in ourselves and in others. God frees us from the chains of shame, and from the chains of a life subject to nature and nurture, by the healing act of God raising Jesus from the dead.

At the beginning of today's scripture reading, Mary Magdalene weeps at the tomb, but by the end, she announces to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

Because the resurrection shows us that no BROKENNESS is beyond the power of God's REDEMPTION. God frees us from the shame of yesterday. Frees us from the influence of nature and nurture. Frees us into making better choices. So we don't keep making the same mistakes over and over again. Frees us to listen to the voice of God in scripture, prayer, and worship. Through the resurrection, God heals our brokenness by freeing us. God frees us from shame, and frees us to make better choices. By the resurrection of Jesus, God FREES us into FREEING.

But the resurrection also shows us that no RELATIONSHIP is beyond the power of God's RECONCILIATION.

Movement 2: The Resurrection Reconciles Us to God and to Each Other

We have lost our way, and we take our relationships for granted. We make snide remarks to those we love. We ask others in our family to choose sides.

And we take God for granted. We no longer pray. We no longer read scripture. And we worship only infrequently. Instead of putting God and those who love us on a pedestal, we put our desires and our careers on a pedestal.

We contemplate running away from those who love us, including family and God, because our own desires are not being met. We ask, "What about me?" Yes, we live in a culture of "me, myself, and I." The song says, "Love the one you are with." But we run from those who love us. But is that what God intends, for us to live in a culture of "me, myself, and I?" Scripture tells us Jesus says very loudly we are to love one another as God first loved us. But we isolate ourselves.

Again, I remind you how today's Gospel reading begins: "Mary stood weeping outside the tomb."

How DO we move from isolation back into relationship?

Let me start this story by telling you studies show alcoholism is an inherited problem, and not a reason to feel ashamed. **A pastor friend of mine tells me a story of an alcoholic and his wife.** The husband loves God, and is not even aware of his alcohol problem. He may even be in denial. But on the way home from work every day, he stops by the bar and drinks several cocktails before coming home. When he gets home, he is verbally abusive to his wife. He tells her she is overweight. After years of this behavior, the wife serves this man, father of middle school and teenage children, with divorce papers. The next Sunday, the pastor invites this couple into his study after worship. He asks them if all the barriers they can identify are removed, would they like to be together again, in an ideal world. They both say yes. Then he gets into the barriers. I have forgotten what the barriers are from the husband's point of view, but the wife says her husband has to never

drink again. Ever. Not for ethical reasons, but because she can no longer take the verbal abuse. The pastor shares with them that God's resurrection of Jesus from the dead demonstrates that no relationship is beyond the power of God's reconciliation. And if they want reconciliation to happen, God is there to help. How do we bring God into a failing relationship? Prayer, scripture, and worship. The husband goes to rehab and Alcoholic's Anonymous. One year later they are back together. That was 9 years ago. He is still abstinent and they are still married.

The Romans tried to consign Jesus to nothingness. Tried to consign Jesus to the big "No." But God has other plans. To the Roman's "No," God responds with a bigger "Yes." Love is stronger than rejection, suffering, and death. God's love for the crucified Jesus reaches into human hearts and minds, and inspires us. God our heavenly daddy freely gives us Jesus, who freely gives himself for us, and God freely raises Jesus from the dead. God gives and forgives, forgives and gives again. God loves us into loving. And God reconciles us from isolation into joyous relationship with God and each other.

Scripture tells us that God loves us into loving. God loves us first, before we love God. And God loves us abundantly. Just as a mother loves a child in prison, so God loves us. Just as the father loves the prodigal child, so God loves us. Just as a mother will not turn away a nursing child, so God loves us. And Jesus tells us that we are to love each other as God loves us. Yes, that IS a tall order. For God's inclusive and unconditional love blows our minds. God our heavenly daddy loves us so much, that he risked coming down to earth and wrapping himself in human flesh as Jesus, making himself vulnerable to crucifixion. And whoever trusts in God's Word and in God's love, will have abundant life. The abundant life of love that is not destroyed by physical death.

At the beginning of today's Gospel reading Mary weeps. But by the end, she announces to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

Because the resurrection shows us that no RELATIONSHIP is beyond the power of God's RECONCILIATION. For God so loved the world that he gives us Jesus, who gives himself to us, and who God raises from the dead. God gives and forgives, forgives and gives again. God LOVES us into LOVING.

But the resurrection also FREES us from our FEARS.

Movement 3: The Resurrection Frees us from Fear

The two things we fear the most are failure and death. You have heard of Thanatology and Thanatopsis. Study of death, and a poem on death by William Cullen Bryant. We live in a thanophobic culture. That is, we live in a death-fearing society. A Dylan Thomas poem reads, "Do not go gently into that good night!" How interesting it is that we fear what happens to all living creatures?

When I was a child, we had family friends with whom we vacationed. The husband and father of the other family took us crabbing on his rowboat in a bay in Delaware. One

day, after his daughter left home and married, he was diagnosed with melanoma. This is a serious skin cancer, that when it relapses, is considered incurable. He had involvement of lymph nodes, and was told he had an 80% chance his cancer would relapse. He did not hear that he also had a 20% chance for cure. So he made his life and his family's life miserable for the next 10 years, until he died of something else, probably due to his stress from fear of death. He missed an opportunity to enjoy life for another 10 years, because of his fear of death.

We also live in fear of failure. Failure to succeed. Failure to accumulate wealth. But scripture tells us that in the economy of God, everything we can ever want is right in front of us. Certainly not in the economy of Wall Street, but resoundingly in the economy of God. The economy of God about which Jesus preached. Where we all share what we have. Because it all belongs to God. We are merely stewards of God's possessions. Like the game of Monopoly, when we die, it all goes back in the box. We cannot carry anything with us. We truly own nothing.

Today's Gospel reading begins: "Mary stood weeping outside the tomb."

How do we move from fear, into confidence and generosity? The resurrection frees us from our fears.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." God frees us from our fearful chains of death and failure, releasing us into confidence and generosity. Because God sees another future. Because God dreams another reality. The creativity of the resurrection shows us that with God all things are possible, and that failure and death are not the end. The crucifixion of grace does not prevent its resurrection. God dreams us into dreaming. We also dream of, and can be confident in, another reality, a reality other than the one the world imposes upon us. How do we tap into God's confidence and generosity? Through scripture, prayer, and worship.

Mary Magdalene begins today's reading weeping at the tomb, but by the end, she announces to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

Because the resurrection FREES us from our FEARS.

Conclusion

Mary weeps at the tomb in brokenness, isolation, and fear. But God's plan is not brokenness, isolation, and fear. God's plan is wholeness, relationship, and confidence. And God's plan prevails. You see, the crucifixion of grace does not prevent its resurrection. God loves us into loving, frees us into freeing, and dreams us into dreaming a new reality. Mary, and you, and I, announce to the world, "Jesus is risen!" To which you respond, "He is risen indeed!"

(Invitation)