

The Courage to Hope

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Easter Sunday, April 24, 2011

Jeremiah 31:1-6

Matthew 28:1-10

The traditions of Easter run deep in some of our families. And personal memory runs just as deep. As I was preparing to sing with children today I remembered one of the first Easter hymns I learned as the child and grandchild of missionaries in India. And I remember it oddly: “Low in the gravy lay Jesus my savior... “ What was Jesus doing low in gravy? But I loved that song, especially its dramatic second half: “Up from the grave he arose, with a mighty triumph o’er his foes. He arose the victor from the dark domain, and he lives forever with his saints to reign. He arose, he arose, hallelujah, Christ arose!”

Traditions run deep for Easter Sunday, but the meaning of the occasion can sometimes run away from us. It even escapes us preachers sometimes. Come on, it's true! I know some of you had to grit your teeth a bit to get here this morning. Like you I have heard many resurrection sermons over the years-- some good, some bad, and some just downright terrible. A few of the iffiest *may* have been ones I heard myself deliver! But I cannot tell a lie. The worst sermon I ever heard was delivered by someone else.

I was but nineteen and I remember it like it was yesterday, it was that bad. As we sat in Bryn Mawr, PA, in a warm Gothic sanctuary crowded to capacity, furs and jewels everywhere, a man up front in an elegant and elevated pulpit spoke eloquently of how technological progress, and the progress of America, testified, in his elevated and educated opinion, to the resurrection. Somehow as he went on-- and on-- the development of rockets and jet planes got to be identified with the rise of the human spirit, and rockets rising got to be identified with Jesus rising from the dead.... Progress, prosperity, the American way, they all got stirred in, and the broad concept of resurrection, got scattered liberally throughout like spice in a progress sauce, admittedly in need of some flavor. As I walked out after worship-- incidentally no one said hello-- I didn't quite know what was wrong, but I was sure of one thing-- we had not heard about the resurrection of Christ.

Surely the resurrection does have something to say to us today! It is NOT merely an affirmation of the powerful, nor self-congratulations for the privileged, nor a general testimonial to the inevitable march of human progress. There is something more substantial going on at the empty tomb than civil religion, pomp and circumstance.

A lot of time has passed since 1978. The young skeptic in the back row of that church in Pennsylvania has somehow inherited a pulpit on Easter morning. Uh Oh. So the question is: if not THAT message, then what is Easter all about?

Beneath all our own childhood memories, behind all the more recent traditions of Easter, lies a deeper memory. It is an ancient story that speaks for itself, the simple account of some poor women stricken with grief, overcome with loss and despair, who early one morning went to a borrowed tomb to find the body of their beloved teacher and friend. They got there only to find the stone rolled away and the grave clothes of their teacher thrown aside. And we aren't sure what they felt: Mark speaks of fear, John tells us Mary wept. But Matthew's gospel affirms that they returned to the others not only with fear but also with “great joy”. In great joy they made their way back to share good news....

What fueled their hope? What made joy possible? Lying even further back in faith's memory is the testimony of the prophet Jeremiah hundreds of years before Jesus:

*The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness;
when Israel sought for rest,
the LORD appeared...from far away.
I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.*

What's it all about? Resurrection faith asserts that the promise of God to a people in exile, the promise of the God of the desert, the God of the prisoner, the God of the slave, is more reliable than the objective harsh data of defeat and loss! A generation ago, Bob Marley sang a Jeremiah-like trust...

*Old pirates, yes they rob I
Sold I to the merchant ship
Minutes after they lifted I
From the bottomless pit
But my hand was made strong,
By the hand of the Almighty
We forward in this generation triumphantly!
Oh, won't you help to sing
These songs of Freedom
Cause all I ever had, redemption song;
All I ever had, redemption song.*

The story of those women at that tomb means that when we have utterly lost hope, when despair has won, we may yet meet a risen Messiah. For the rest of our lives we forever must deal with their testimony of a surprise ending.

Indeed the surprising hope of these witnesses is our testimony too, for we too live in the open door of an empty tomb. No matter how tempting it is to give up, to declare our whole world all a noble tragedy and go home, or even give into discouragement and decide that life is a meaningless existential trap, the experience of that empty tomb catches us up short. We find ourselves compelled once more, challenged, dared, encouraged – given courage--to live in hope.

Have *you* met the risen Jesus, or have you glimpsed an empty tomb and had your presumptions shattered, about what is and isn't possible? It isn't all about mystical moments alone in a garden. I experienced the resurrection of hope several years ago in a prison dormitory. I was quite depressed, discouraged one day, about a week into a stay in the Montville Correctional facility in Connecticut. Some friends and I had been invited to sojourn there, following a civil disobedience action in front of a nuclear weapons manufacturing facility. As I looked out through the bars I had a great view. I could see through the heavy glass to the prison yard to the fence with razor wire, to the man sitting on the back of a station wagon in the open field beyond, with reflector glasses and a loaded shotgun. I felt, well, I felt pretty enclosed. It was very real: a dead end.

And then, unbidden, something happened! It was as though the bars were starting to melt. I felt God very close by. Jesus was right there: right there. I came to understand that because of this Jesus, the bars there were not nearly so real as the jailers or the judge imagined! I could see them melt away. I felt I could walk right out of there-- I was utterly free in the presence of the Spirit. Once more, there was, within this soul, the courage to hope.

Truly I say to you: the risen Jesus visits jail cells – a lot. The risen Christ shows up in war zones – a lot. We have met Christ by hospital beds and in funeral parlors. We have seen Jesus on back streets among hardened children. Right there. The tomb gets thrown open more often – more often than we can imagine. The risen one shows up still, where we least expect.

On Easter Sunday morning we remember that through the power of God, through the earth-shaking mind bending reality of the resurrection of Christ Jesus, our previous understanding of what is possible and realistic and doable has been pushed aside, a stone rolled away as though it were nothing. All our fear of death, all our assumptions about what it means to be defeated, all our despair: all these have been rolled away.

In the light of Christ's resurrection you and I can be freed up personally from our fears, our numbness and caution. We are freed to live dangerously, because we know now, that the most important things cannot be taken away. We are freed to meet Jesus all over again, in a fresh light. We can be healed again, as though for the first time. We can start over, as human beings. We can dare to live on the basis of a new law, a new covenant – the law of Love.

Resurrection is the central reality, the essence of Christianity. This is real, people! At the heart of our faith this experience, this testimony, plants in us the courage to hope.