

“Practicing Resurrection”

Luke 24: 1-12

Easter/C, April 4, 2010

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As we hear Luke’s account of the Easter story, I wonder how many of us still consider this story an idle tale. Is the resurrection something that happened long ago to Jesus, the power of which we experience through him or is resurrection something we can all experience, whether or not we are dead? In a recent sermon Nora Gallagher talks about practicing resurrection. She takes the term from a Wendell Berry poem, “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer’s Liberation Front” in which he writes in his final stanza, “Be like the fox, who makes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong direction, practice resurrection.” It is a curious notion, considering how one might practice resurrection. Perhaps the old news about Easter is that it is about resurrection. The new news may be that it is not so much about the resurrection of Jesus as it is about our own.

Perhaps we spend too much time “believing” in the resurrection or not “believing.” In so doing, we just may lose the point. Nora Gallagher says, “When I think about the resurrection now, I not only wonder about what happened to Jesus, I ponder what happened to his disciples. Something happened to them, too. They went into hiding after the crucifixion, but after the resurrection appearances, they walked back out into the world. They became braver and stronger; they visited strangers, and healed the sick. It was not just what they saw when they saw Jesus, or how they saw it, but what was set free in them...what if resurrection is not about the appearances of Jesus alone but also about what those appearances point to, what they ask. It’s finally what we do with them that matters; make them into superstitions or use them as stepping stones to new life. Maybe resurrection, like everything else, needs to be practiced.”

The gospel reading tells the story of three women that were close to Jesus. According to Luke, they were the first to go to the tomb and to discover what happened to Jesus. Three days after Jesus’ death the women make the long, difficult journey to care for their friend. They were still in mourning because everything that meant anything to them had been taken away. They expected to prepare his cold, dead body for a proper burial. They were worried because although they were three strong women, they may not be able to gain entrance to the tomb. If no one were around to help them, they may not have the strength, emotionally and physically, to roll the stone away. Never the less, they make this sorrow-filled journey.

As they approach the tomb they are relieved to find the stone has been rolled away. When they enter, their relief turns to disbelief. Instead of finding Jesus’ body, they find two men in dazzling clothes. They are perplexed, what have they done with Jesus? The men assure them saying, “why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners and be crucified and on the third day rise again.” They of course, remember nothing. Jesus had in fact, on many occasions, told his disciples what would happen. However, they could not comprehend what he was telling

them. They knew nothing about resurrection. The only experience they had with such things was with their friend Lazarus. Jesus had brought him back to life after being dead for four days. Is this what Jesus was talking about?

After hearing the news from the men in the tomb, the women did remember. I can imagine it was like a bolt of electricity going through them. They were propelled forward, away from the tomb and back to the other disciples to tell their story. When they reach the men and share what they have heard and seen, they were met with more disbelief. The men considered their story an idle tale. It did not matter that Jesus had told them what would happen. The women must be hysterical; they must be making it up. Thankfully, Peter has the presence of mind to go see for himself. He was not willing to believe or disbelieve on the word of some women.

It is true. Jesus is risen! A proclamation to which the faithful reply, “he is risen indeed!” Death did not have the final word. Darkness would not prevail. Jesus is alive. He is not dead, as they presumed. He was most certainly dead when they took him from the cross, wrapped his body and laid him in the tomb. Now he is no where to be found. Jesus later appears to the disciples in various ways and various places. Eventually he will leave them. Then they and we are left with the memory and a story to tell and retell. However this is more than a story and it is certainly not an idle tale.

Bruce Epperly says, “Resurrection is not for the faint-hearted; but for people whose stature enables them to affirm life in the midst of death...If resurrection is to be a living event for us as well as for the first witnesses, it must emerge from an encounter that transcends our own experience; yet it must also be grounded in our receptivity to resurrection and the faith of a community that practices resurrection.” In order for resurrection to become more than an idle tale, it must become enfolded in the lives of all believers.

Resurrection is not a momentary occurrence. It is not a singular event. Resurrection is about what is set free in us whenever we encounter the living Christ. In that moment at the tomb, the women were transformed from loved ones who came to perform rites for the dead to apostles who bear witness to the living Christ. Now their task was to proclaim Christ risen, to comfort the afflicted, to heal the sick and feed the hunger. They were entrusted with the full ministry of their leader, to live as he lived with all the joy and risks that entails. The good news of Easter is not only that Jesus Christ has risen and lives now among us, but also that the power of the resurrection can transform our lives as well. New life is possible, now, here, today. But for that to happen, we need not only to be reminded of resurrection, but also to practice resurrection.

In Jim Wallis’ book, *God’s Politics*, he tells a powerful story about practicing resurrection. This story took place in South Africa, when, to all outward appearances, apartheid still had a strangle-hold on power and Nelson Mandela was still in jail. Wallis was at an ecumenical service at the Cathedral of St. George’s where Archbishop Desmond Tutu, was presiding, when a group of the notorious South African Security Police broke into the service. Wallis writes:

“Tutu stopped preaching and just looked at the intruders as they lined the walls of his cathedral, wielding writing pads and tape recorders...they had already arrested Tutu and other church leaders just a few weeks before and kept them in jail for several days...after meeting their eyes with his in a steely gaze, the church leader acknowledged their power but reminded them that he served a higher power than their political authority. Then in the most extraordinary challenge to political tyranny I have ever witnessed, Archbishop Desmond Tutu told the representatives of South African Apartheid, “Since you have already lost, I invite you today to come and join the winning side.” He said it with a smile on his face and an enticing warmth in his invitation, but with a clarity and a boldness that took everyone’s breath away. The congregation’s response was electric. The crowd was literally transformed by the bishop’s challenge to power. From a cowering fear of the heavily armed security forces that surrounded the cathedral and greatly outnumbered the band of worshippers, we literally leaped to our feet, shouted the praises of God and began dancing. We danced out of the cathedral to meet the awaiting police and military forces who not knowing what else to do, backed up to provide space for the people of faith to dance for freedom in the streets of South Africa.”

Ten years later, Wallis attended the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as president. Wallis spoke to Archbishop Tutu and asked him if he remembered that earlier day when they had danced out of the Cathedral onto the streets, and Tutu said that, indeed, he did remember. Wallis reflects that apartheid did not die on the day Mandela was released or inaugurated, but that it died the day of the celebration in the church, when they danced for freedom in the streets of South Africa. (From: Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano, Sermon from Easter Day, April 4, 2010)

That is what it means to practice resurrection. In the face of falsehood, oppression, bigotry and hate we dance. When the world declares you worthless, you break out in song. When your friends have given up on you and left you for dead, you take the hand of a mysterious partner who has come to save your life and you allow him to lead you. When all hope is gone, you hear the band play and you just keep moving. We don’t need to look for the living among the dead or live as the dead among the living. We need only hear the music and move forward. When we have encountered the living Christ something is released within us. We are alive to Christ and the whole world knows it. There is nothing that can defeat us. We will dance into a new tomorrow, practicing the resurrection. Amen!

Sources:

Nora Gallagher, “The Complicity of Silence” sermon for May 28, 2006.

Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano, Sermons that Work, Easter Day, April 4, 2010.