

Easter Sunday 2016

Sermon 3.27.16

Scripture: Luke 24:1-12

Happy Easter, everyone. Happy *Resurrection Day*. It's a big deal, which some congregations will make clear this morning. More flowers, fancier music, a longer liturgy, Hot Cross Buns at coffee hour: some congregations will make it clear that Resurrection Day is the queen of days.

Less here. I've always felt that we're an "any given Sunday" sort of church more than a "high holy day" sort. We do any given Sunday well, which means the biggies can feel like a let down.

But maybe there's something right in Resurrection Day being somewhat ordinary. Resurrection, the word, can be understood to mean simply a setting things to right, a putting back into use something that has fallen into disuse. An insurrection is an uprising against a larger, powerful force. A resurrection isn't quite as dramatic. It's a simple setting something to right.

I was out for a run earlier this week, on a windy day. I came upon a sign in front of the library. A temporary sign, it had been blown over and now it lay, unreadable, on its own face. I paused my run, stood the sign back up, and then, resuming, realized I had just resurrected the sign — setting it to right, setting it back into use. Next, I wondered if God felt about the resurrection of Jesus as something similar: "Whoops, he got knocked over," and then a simple setting him back up into use.

Is that too much of a let-down for you? If so, then let's consider resurrection from our perspective. If to God this was simply something long-promised and easily done, it can hardly be thought so from our point of view. From the view down here, resurrection is far from ordinary.

Certainly, the women who first went to the tomb found it so. Perplexing, dazzling, terrifying: this didn't fit into anything that they knew of the world. Rowan Williams, once Archbishop of Canterbury, wondering two thousand years later at the meaning of it all, begins with questions. Of the resurrection: "Is it a reversal of a tragedy? a happy ending? a promise of revenge against the sinful judges who brought Jesus to his death? It is none of these," he then says. "The resurrection comes across as radically unexpected, almost disconnected with

what has gone before. It is...the bare fact that the life of Jesus is not contained or swallowed up by the way of this world, not even by the 'natural' ways of death and corruption."

What's more (but now according to me) life *in* Jesus is also not contained, not swallowed up—for this event isn't just about what happened to Jesus but also what happens to us, those of us who seek life in Christ or through Christ or with Christ. So, as far as we're concerned, resurrection is the bare fact that life in God is neither contained nor swallowed up but ever moving beyond what we might expect, what we could plan for, what we are even often able to hope for and to watch for.

Resurrection, then, beckons to us from across all boundaries past which we cannot see or even imagine, all boundaries that therefore seem insurmountable, impregnable, final. Death is the most obvious of these, but it isn't the only one. Wherever we believe there is no way forward, of whatever we've been convinced there is no way through or beyond: resurrection is an acknowledgment of these things—an acknowledgement of their fierce insistence (Jesus did, after all, really die)—but then an urging past their ferocity, their hard and fastness, into something new and full and good.

"But" is therefore rightly how it begins, how that near disconnection is expressed. "But" is a hinge from that final end hinges into some long-intended new creation, a pivot from blockade to new possibility. So, not coincidentally, "but" is how Luke begins his telling of that first resurrection day: "But on the first day of the week..."

"But": like "yes," though with more to consider, like "no," though not quite so final, "but" is an authoritative word, the one who responds to what has come before now taking charge. As such "but" could well be thought of as the way of God in the world. Not merely "yes" to our expectations or demands, not "no" to our need and hope, God is "but." The resurrection is "but."

As to what this "but" hinges to, it's no less than a new creation. The women, we should remember, arrived at the tomb when it was yet early dawn, which could as easily be translated "deep" dawn. This, I think, our gospel writer, Luke, wrote in order that we might hear the same sort of depth that there was before the beginning. That darkened deep, that unformed void: out of this comes a new beginning. Something here, then, on this morning of the first day of the week, is happening on the magnitude of the creation at the very first. Something is happening in this deep darkness on the order of "in the beginning."

And we have some sense as to what, in Luke's understanding, this new creation might be. Considering as we should that Jesus' ministry, according to Luke, began with his proclaiming himself as the anointed one come to bring good news to the poor and recovery of sight to the blind, release to the captives and freedom for the oppressed, we have some notion as to what Luke witnessed Jesus to be and to be ushering in. Professor of New Testament, Greg Carey, writing for the *Huffington Post*, of all things, explains, "For Luke, Jesus' death carries no saving power on its own. It provides no atonement for sins, whatever we may mean by atonement. Instead, Jesus dies as a consequence of his commitment to bless all people, especially the poor and sinners. He continues these activities even on the cross. And his resurrection vindicates him as the world's savior who brings God's presence to humankind. Because of the resurrection, Jesus' ministry continues through the church—despite its imperfections."

Well, none of this, of course, the women then knew. None of this they then, at that moment of perplexity and terror, could they possibly recognize. All they knew, these women who were first on the scene: all they could see was no stone, no body, and then these two in dazzling white, wondering, "Why do you look for the Living One among the dead?"

*But* then they remembered. They remembered how Jesus had told them that he must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again. They remembered, and then they returned from the tomb—and this seems like a non-event, right? To remember: this seems like an unremarkable thing, a blip in the mind. The things I forget and then remember over the course of a day: they're nothing, they mean nothing. Such absent-mindedness, such a scattering of awareness: it's nothing, concerned with all things unimportant.

Yet why, then, is remembering such a central part of the liturgy of communion, which is itself a central part of the lived Christian faith? "Do this in remembrance of me," Jesus is said to have said, which thus gave rise to the sacrament that has been *the* central binding act of Christian communities ever since. If remembering is but a common, unremarkable, ineffective thing, why is it then so central to that which is so central?

I've had this conversation with a couple of you over the last couple of weeks, so I'll repeat myself here because I think it's important. The sort of remembrance meant both in the sacrament, and in the witness and meaning-making of the empty tomb is not merely a mental

act. Remembering Jesus in the breaking of the bread isn't just giving him a passing thought while we eat bread and drink a shot of juice. Remembering Jesus' telling of rising after having been killed isn't just giving a passing thought to this thing you never really understood in the first place. This sort of remembering that's intended here isn't just such an exercise of the mind, and a weak one at that. No, this remembering is soulful, is existential. To re-member in this way is to re-connect, to re-bind to that from which you've been dis-membered, cut off (or you perceived yourself to have been). To re-member is to correct some prior act of dis-memberment, to set to right some previous (and wrong) cutting off.

What's more, to re-member has something to do truth—the Greek word for truth being *aletheia*, which means to stop forgetting. To stop forgetting, to re-member, is to come to truth—that which persists and insists, that which abides (faith and hope and love).

Well, this might seem like so much *leros*, which is indeed what the other disciples thought it—the eleven and all the rest of them. *Leros*: a word that doesn't appear anywhere else in the Bible, certainly doesn't appear anywhere else in Luke's writing, neither in his gospel narrative nor in the book of Acts, which he also wrote.

Luke was an elegant writer, after all, so he didn't tend to resort to such vulgarities. A couple weeks ago Nancy, in preaching to us, went on at some length as to why Luke is her favorite gospel. His concern for women (as made evident in the central role they play in so many stories he remembers), his concern for outsiders (as made clear in his inclusion of Gentiles and demoniacs in so much that he relates): Luke understands God in Christ to be wide in concern and mercy, to be universal in scope and sending out. These are reasons I also like Luke; and here's one more, that he's an elegant writer.

Which makes his reliance on such a thing that much more striking. *Leros*: a word that appears only here, in reference to these words of the women that seemed to the men idle talk, in reference to these words of the first preachers of the gospel that seemed to the first hearers an idle tale. Our translators spared us the indignity of having such language litter our Easter morning, and since we've decided our service this morning is to be family-friendly, I'll only hint at what *leros* actually means: bulls make it.

So here it is: the hard fact that the first people to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ crucified and raised were dismissed as full of —. ....Pause pause

The same might be said of you, you know. If you decide to live as if the boundaries that seem so hard and fast in this life are actually just pivotal; if you decide to act as if situations and people that are so obviously beyond hope might actually be grounds for new possibility and flourishing; if you decide to speak as if resurrection were both the most ordinary thing when it comes to what God can do but also the most extraordinary thing when it comes to what we together in and with God might witness and accomplish: people might consider you full of —.

I have a friend from high school whom I know best now through Facebook. He's smart and witty and posts interesting things; he also comments on my posts, funny and thoughtful and kind. A few months ago he posted something about religious people in an exchange he was having with another of his friends. He doesn't think we're quite psychotic but... It wasn't aimed at me; I doubt he even had me, or any other of his particular friends, in mind when he wrote it. What's more, I know he knows what "psychotic" actually means: it's not an insult, it's a diagnosis, and moreover one that would wrongly be made if it applied to most of the world's people throughout history. But still it stung and, though I didn't "unfriend" him, I did quit following his posts.

I'm not so sensitive to what all other people think — not anymore. I guess I've grown mostly used to being thought of as full of —. And really, it might be for the good. That sort of thing can make fertile ground. Peter did, after all, get up and run to the tomb — this in spite of his apparent initial dismissal of what the women had told. He did, after all, run to the tomb and, finding it empty, became himself filled with amazement.

So, if you go forth from this place full of idle tales of an empty tomb, consider yourself warned about how some might perceive you — warned that you might be dismissed, warned that you as well might be pivotal, in someone else's day, in someone else's life, in the grand story of life as it continues to unfold, or more simply to yourself.

If so, then happy Easter indeed. Happy *Resurrection* day — extraordinary and ordinary as it is.

Thanks be to God.