

SERMON: "RESURRECTION: IT'S NOT FOR COWARDS"

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A few nights ago in this sanctuary, we celebrated Passover. That night a traditional question was asked: why is this night different from all other nights?" The answer speaks of a journey to freedom, of slaves becoming free, led from their bondage in Egypt by God's servant Moses.

Today, we ask, "Why is this day different from all other Sundays?" The answer is of course, on this day Jesus rose from the dead and transformed despair into joy. Joy so amazing that all Christians celebrate his appearance as the Easter bunny.

Now that I have your attention here is the real question of the day: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? The angelic answer is this: He is not here, but has risen.

My goal this morning is not to teach you what you do not know about Easter. My goal is simply to remind you of what you already know: "Resurrection is God's work." That's the heart of the matter this Easter day!

If you have come out of duty this morning, because Easter is something you do, open your heart and let it be stirred by the sights and sounds of this day, the tastes and the aromas of life. God will do the rest.

If you come this morning with barely an inkling of resurrection in your life; it is enough. Water it, nurture it, and tend the garden of possibilities already stirring in your life. God will do the rest.

If you come, as I do, with 30 plus years of intense attention to the details of this day, to the ambiguities surrounding Jesus death and resurrection,

I remind you as I remind myself: This is God's doing, this resurrection mystery, and no amount of skepticism from any quarter can undo what has already been accomplished in your life and in the countless lives of women and men who have been transformed simply because they believed what they have not seen.

Found Jesus' bones? Turn to the Discovery Channel and learn more; but on this Easter Day, bones lost and now found prove nothing.

Matched someone's DNA with Jesus' DNA found on the only true relic of the cross? Call Oprah. DNA proves only what we already know, such a one as this lived once and still does.

Resurrection is God's work and no amount of research by the best CSI team on television will ever change that truth.

We celebrate this day, knowing full well, that death and despair remain unconquered. The families of those who have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan in flag draped coffins cannot easily put aside their grief. The family of Phoebe Prince, a 15 year-old freshman at South Hadley High in Massachusetts who committed suicide in January after months of verbal and physical bullying by her peers must still deal with their despair and the criminal charges leveled at nine students indicted on March 29th for her death. The families of Oliver Stokes and Jessica Zarate killed on March 17th at the corner of Royal and Sinaloa

just a block away still grieve their tragic deaths and endure the consequences wrought by the 17 year-old driver who ran a red light.

Resurrection does not wash away death and its aftermath; resurrection restores life to the living. Nor does resurrection wash away scandal. Our Roman Catholic friends observe this day amidst what the National Catholic Reporter calls "... the largest institutional crisis in centuries, possibly in church history." The current pedophile-priest scandal has found its way to the insulated walls of the Vatican and the insulated Pontiff who now presides over its vast holdings and the millions of believers who seek solace in their faith.

There is no pleasure to be taken from this scandal; but there is resurrection hope to be tendered in the names of those who have suffered physically and most grievously of all, spiritually. Resurrection restores courage in the midst of injustice and when it comes to injustice the church as institution deserves no amnesty.

Lastly, resurrection cannot wash away hatred. As we observe the anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968, we cannot hide from the ongoing presence of violence that has its roots in Christian fundamentalism.

On Saturday, March 27, Michigan police successfully thwarted a plot by the Christian militia group, Hutaree, to kill a police officer and then ambush the officer's funeral to kill all government officials who would have gathered. According to the group's website it was all in preparation for "the End Time battles to keep the testimony of Jesus Christ alive."

Despite the arrests made last weekend, The Southern Poverty Law Center reminds us that in the past year alone the existing number of patriot and militia groups has increased 244% to 512.

Driven by the election of Barack Obama, the ailing economy, our country's increasing diversity and the recent health care debates, the flames of anti-government sentiment continue to rise among religiously motivated extremist groups.

But here's the deal:

Resurrection reminds us that Easter is larger than the testimony of any one Christian. To kill in the name of God and for the sake of Christ's testimony strikes at the foundation of God's Easter witness. The day that the testimony of Christ undoes the love, compassion and justice that Jesus embodied in his life and teachings will be the day that the Roman Imperial Empire that crucified him truly wins.

That will never happen though if we always remember that on the first Easter day ever celebrated, God vindicated Jesus, not the powers that crucified him. God said YES to love and goodness; to compassion and justice, while saying NO to oppressive powers and principalities.

New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan writing about Jesus' Last Week make clear that anyone who calls Jesus their personal lord and savior must also call him their political lord and savior. In saying this they go to the heart of what Jesus stood up against when he confronted the oppressive nature of Roman imperialism.

If every Christian held these two poles in tension, the personal and political message of Jesus, there would be no Tea Party insurrectionists, no left or right wing preening.

What we would know in our bones is what Borg and Crossan conclude: “Love is the soul of justice and justice is the embodiment of love. That is the power God resurrected in Jesus’ name.

The reason resurrection is not for cowards is because resurrection can only be witnessed and experienced by those who labor for compassion in every strata of the human condition:

in the slums of Calcutta,
among those reduced to foraging in garbage heaps,
in urban and suburban schools where bullying goes unnoticed,
among Wall Street greed and entitlement driven bankers ...

Resurrection is not for cowards because resurrection can only be witnessed and experienced by

those who labor for justice –
for migrant farm workers,
for the poor in Haiti,
for undocumented immigrants from every land
for political prisoners,
for gays and lesbians ...

The list unfortunately is endless. But resurrection is eternal.

Julia Esquivel, an exiled Guatemalan poet reinforces this truth in her powerful poem, “They Have Threatened Us with Resurrection”

*What keeps us from sleeping
Is that they have threatened us with resurrection!
Because at each nightfall,
Though exhausted from the endless inventory
Of killings since 1954,
Yet we continue to love life,
And do not accept their death!*

*...Because in this marathon of Hope,
there are always others to relieve us
in bearing the courage necessary
to arrive at the goal which lies beyond death...*

*Accompany us then on this vigil
And you will know what it is to dream!*

*You will then know how marvelous it is
To live threatened with resurrection!
To dream awake,
To keep watch asleep
To live while dying
And to already know oneself resurrected!*

Life is not for the fainthearted and neither is resurrection.

Resurrection is about radical courage... its about the journey from the graves of our lives to the glory of God. Resurrection is more than a course in the basics of life...its an experience of the promise of life

As Esquivel says:

*...Because in this marathon of Hope,
there are always others to relieve us
in bearing the courage necessary
to arrive at the goal which lies beyond death...*

Resurrection reminds us that there is always life beyond death, justice beyond injustice, compassion beyond violence

Resurrection is both God's dream and it can always be ours for the asking.

Resurrection is something we practice...day in and day out...with each other. We take risks, we conquer fear, we comfort grief, we offer forgiveness, we tell the truth in love, and we resist despair!

In Wendell Berry's "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front," he writes:

*As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go.*

*Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.*

Dear friends, like all good poets, Esquivel and Berry and Rumi challenge us to be not afraid. They call us to practice resurrection, practice hope, practice love, practice compassion and practice the social expression of compassion which is justice.

"Resurrection is God's work." Receive it for the gift it is. And I promise you this:

In all your living, no matter the consequences, you will know joy in abundance and amazement so rare and so radical that you will forever bear the courage necessary to arrive at the goal of God which lies beyond death. Amen.

