

Peter, Paul, and Mary

Easter Sunday

March 31, 2013

Gordon Wiersma

Text: John 20

The ‘Peter, Paul and Mary’ reference of the sermon title is going to date all of us in some way or another today. If you are of my baby-boomer generation, I’m quite sure that the singing group ‘Peter, Paul and Mary’ is somewhere in your musical landscape – if you’re a bit older than that, or a bit younger or considerably younger, then I’m not so sure. But they were a folk music trio of the 1960s, and whether or not you are familiar with them, I would bet that “Puff the Magic Dragon” would be a common reference point for all ages – everyone knows that song, right? – I didn’t know it was a ‘Peter, Paul and Mary’ song until I looked them up this week on Wikipedia! But I am not going to sing that or any other 60s folk songs today – it’s just that ‘Peter, Paul and Mary’ were known for their 3-part harmonies blending into one, and that’s what I am going to try to do too with this Easter Day sermon. In our texts today we have Peter, Paul and Mary – Peter in Acts, Paul in Corinthians and Mary in the Gospel of John – and it seemed to me that each one had something particular for us to listen to – something important on its own – and something even richer when we weave the 3 of them together. So I suppose it’s really just a 3-part or even 3-point sermon – but I’m calling it a 3-part harmony to dress it up a bit for Easter. So you can hum ‘Puff the Magic Dragon’ or ‘Leaving on a Jet Plane’ if you like, but I’m going to start with Acts...

The speech we heard from Peter in Acts 10 is the conclusion of the story of Peter and Cornelius. Cornelius is a Roman soldier who through various circumstances is brought together with Peter, and Cornelius becomes a follower of Jesus Christ. And just in case you don’t realize it, this is remarkable! – Peter thinks Jesus is just for Jews; Cornelius is a Gentile, a non-Jew – and it takes

a whole lot of convincing for Peter – visions and revelations and the voice of God – to realize that this good news of Jesus is for Cornelius too. This is a huge deal in the fledgling early church – right after this story, the disciples, church leaders, gather to grapple with this stunning development: Gentiles?! Peter has to defend himself and convince others that his connection to Cornelius is a good thing, the right thing, until finally the others accept this stunning development and say in Acts 11:18 – “so God had given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life”. This is a seismic shift in the life of the church – the good news is for all!

But, is there a part of you, like me, that is not so impressed with their insight? – it’s hard for me to believe that Peter and the others thought this faith was just for them as Jews – it seems so obvious to me (as a Gentile!) that this good news of Jesus would be for all. But, let me step back from my sense of superiority that Peter and the others should have figured this out a bit sooner, and instead ask us all to put ourselves in Peter’s shoes for the day. The wonderful thing about Peter as you read through the Gospels and then into Acts, is that he shows a steady pattern of not getting it and getting it, when it comes to following Jesus – he is an expert both at putting his foot in his mouth and at holding forth with the truth – and it’s an ongoing cycle: any current insights are no guarantee against future missteps. So given that, it seems to me that what Peter helps us to proclaim on Easter Day is this: ‘Christ is Risen, and we don’t get it! – Christ is Risen, and we don’t understand what it means!’ You don’t see that slogan in a lot of Easter Sunday church ads – it wasn’t in ours! And I don’t mean ‘Christ is Risen, and we don’t get it!’ as some sort of downplaying the resurrection story or an expression of existential faith angst. I mean it as something quite exciting – that there is more to discover, more to be revealed to us about what this resurrection story means. Peter knew a lot – and then there was more! – and if you look right after this passage, Peter is surprised again when others besides Cornelius believe too, surprised he has to baptize them all. Peter knew a lot – but there was more. That’s a good word for us, for the church, for you and me. For a couple of thousand years the church has harvested much from the bountiful story of Christ living, dying, rising again – and there is more – more to

learn and challenge and do. For 150 years, Hope Church has harvested much as a community of faith in Christ- and there is more – more to hear and say and do. And you, whether faith is old or new, vibrant or dormant, hopeful or fearful, confident or questioning – there is more for you today – more in this story of life for your life. ‘Christ is Risen and we don’t understand’ – what a marvelous Easter invitation. That’s Peter’s part in today’s harmony of the Easter song.

Peter – Paul. I do appreciate Paul – kind of like you love and appreciate a know-it-all older brother who makes you roll your eyes just a bit (you don’t need to mention that to my older brother if you ever meet him!). I confess that my first choice would be an Easter duet - Peter and Mary - but I am setting aside my personal older-brother issues and including Paul too. Paul in the Corinthians passage is very theological in a systematic sort of way- logical arguments about death and resurrection, salvation history from Adam to the end of time in just a few verses, atonement theology – in other words, Paul is very Pauline. And thank God for that – I can roll my eyes at Paul, but the systematic theology to unpack in what he expresses is essential – it’s just doesn’t necessarily seem the best focus for this day. And so I want to simply pull out this from what Paul says – the good news that in Christ, death is defeated – that our lives when they end, are made new in Christ. Easter can be a hard day – people here have had loved ones die recently – perhaps you have too; or not so recently, the loss remains. Grief is held tenderly among us and in some way we are always facing the reality of death for ourselves and those we love – and we see beyond as well to the loss always present in the world around us. In Paul’s systematic theology of the truth of resurrection to eternal life, there is a pastoral word of promise. That promise resonated deeply with me in one of the prayers in the Good Friday liturgy just 2 days ago – the prayer is written as a prayer to Jesus as he dies on the cross:

*Go, silent friend, your life has found its ending. To dust returns your weary mortal frame.
God, who before birth, called you into being, now calls you back, his accent still the same.
You cannot cling to life forever, nor can we cling to a dying frame... So go to heaven, where
you will welcome those who die in faith, whose death, with your death, we remember. Tell*

them that we love them, that we miss them, that they are not forgotten. And cheered by the prospect of a day when there will be no more death or parting, and all shall be well and all shall be one, may they who have died before us be among the first to welcome us to heaven where, with you enthroned in glory, and in the company of all the saints, we will share the everlasting feast of your family. Until then, keep us in faith, fill us with hope, deepen us through love, to the glory of your holy name. Amen.

(from 'Stages on the Way')

Paul adds his part to the harmony: 'the last enemy to be destroyed is death – all will be made alive in Christ' – on an Easter Day, we who are acquainted with death know the promise of life.

Peter. Paul. And Mary.

I'm not sure if Mary is the melody or part of the harmony of this 3-part Easter song, but I do know that there is a different note, tone, from Mary's story – different than Peter and Paul – because it is, simply, a story. It is a very personal story of Mary and Jesus – a grieving Mary going to Jesus' tomb to honor his death; a confused Mary as she finds the tomb empty; and joyful Mary as she meets the Risen Lord. The interaction described between Jesus and Mary is very tender and perhaps even a bit playful from Jesus as he waits for her to recognize him. But let me point out just an interesting, or even quirky detail that I noticed about this story. We're told Mary is crying by the tomb – angels say 'why are you weeping?', Mary says 'I don't know where the body is'; then we're told Mary TURNS and sees Jesus (but doesn't recognize him) – Jesus also says 'why are you weeping?' - Mary says 'I don't know where the body is' – Jesus says 'Mary!' – and she TURNS and says 'Rabouni/Teacher!' It's lovely – but the staging doesn't make sense – she turns twice. I don't know - but let's not solve that - let's just go with it, and use that image of turning...which would be something like this: are you turned toward a dead-end, or turned to the living Lord? Jesus says 'Mary' – and she turns to her Teacher, her Lord.

Peter and Paul give us the grand scope of faith and theology that this day commands; and Mary tells us this cosmic story is personal – your Teacher, your Risen Lord – the one who knows and calls you by name. I know that dead-ends are there in us – they remain in us and around us; but it is in our turning to that voice, that truth, that life – only in your Lord and mine that we truly know resurrection, the victory of life; we have not experienced that fully – our Lord has. And for our story to join the grand story - for you to have the hope and encouragement, the faith and courage, the joy and delight, the healing and conviction, the guidance and purpose, needed to navigate this challenging life – it is in turning to your Risen Lord that such provisions for life are found – for you – the Risen Lord calling your name – turning.

Peter. Paul. And Mary.

One of that trio's big songs was "If I had a Hammer" – and the 3rd verse of it goes: 'If I had a song – I'd sing it in the morning...' And this is the Easter song that our Peter, Paul, and Mary give in 3-part harmony for us to blend together in our lives as followers of Jesus: we don't understand – thanks be to God; death is defeated – thanks be to God; we turn to our Risen Lord – thanks be to God. It's an Easter song to sing all over this land.

AMEN.