

The Subversive Hope of Easter
Third Sunday of Easter
April 14, 2013
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Texts: Acts 9.1-20
Psalm 30
Revelation 5.11-14
John 21.1-19

I think it was about a month or two ago when my daughter tugged on my sleeve and said in a voice that sounded far younger than her almost five years, “Mommy, you mad at me?” She had just done something that she knew was wrong. You could sense the trembling heart behind that trembling lip that desperately wants and needs to be loved and accepted. We may get more sophisticated in hiding the trembling lip or in controlling the quivering voice. But the trembling heart remains the same. You know you’ve been there. I’ve certainly been there. When you wonder whether this time your failure will trigger your worst fear: a rejection that leaves you utterly alone.

The final chapters of John’s gospel show us disciple after disciple fumbling around trying to find their way after devastating trauma and loss. Each of them stumbles. Few of them even recognize Jesus. Even when he makes himself known they still don’t understand. On Easter we read about Mary just clinging to Jesus wanting to go back to the way things had been before. Last Sunday we heard about Thomas looking for something tangible and real to hold onto. Today we read of Peter still awash in his guilt but eager to find restoration. Each time, as Gordon observed last week, the risen Lord meets each one with compassion and patience. I imagine Jesus with the same fullness of heart as I felt as he looks on their trembling hearts and can see through all the fumbling to their desperate desire to be loved and accepted and restored. This epilogue to John’s gospel is yet one more example of the way that the risen Christ keeps coming to us in the midst of our fumbling and foolish ways to feed and to restore us.

This passage, scholars will point out, is full of allusions to other scriptures. Each one meant to evoke theological reflection. I hadn’t fully tracked until reading this week that the disciples never catch fish in any of the Gospels without Jesus’ guidance.¹ Peter’s nakedness draws our minds to the story of creation and the shame that came over the human beings when they became aware of their nakedness before God. Peter acknowledges that shame as he puts clothes back on, but rather than going to hide as they do in the story of creation he jumps into the water he is so eager for his fellowship and communion with Christ to be restored². The meal Jesus is cooking for them on the shore evokes memories of other feedings of fish and bread; both from

¹ Thomas H. Troeger, *Feasting on the Word Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 423.

² Joseph A. Bessler, *Feasting on the Word Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 422 and 424.

the gospel stories as well as the images from the prophets of the great banquets to which we will be invited when God's realm has fully come. The risen Christ comes and finds the disciples. He guides them in their labor, he feeds their hungry bodies by sharing with them a sacred meal, and he gives to Peter the opportunity to restore his trembling and broken heart. Hidden within these post-resurrection stories beyond the strangeness of them and behind the many questions they raise in modern minds are some very basic truths about how the risen Christ meets us in the midst of our labors, in response to our hunger, coming to restore our trembling and broken hearts.

When Cassidy first spoke those heart rending words a month or so ago, my first instinct was to sweep her up into my arms and assure her that I loved her. But I recognize not only in that moment of parenting but also in looking at these stories of the gospel what Jesus offers and what I am invited to do in all of my relationships is something more than a pastoral response meant to appease and smooth over. In each case there is a commissioning; a challenge to start again and to move in some new directions.

What I admire in the stories of Jesus, what I aspire to in the relationships of my own life, is to love with the kind of fierceness I see in Christ. He is not interested in making things easy for Peter. That encounter on the beach is brutal in some ways. You can feel Peter's desperation to get this interrogation over with. But Jesus presses him. He knows how crucial it is for Peter to leave his guilt behind and he will only be able to do that if he can speak boldly of his love for Jesus and can hear how much trust Jesus is placing in him. If Jesus had opted for the easy way out and mumbled some kind of "It's ok Peter – forget about it" he would have left Peter to finish out his life on a fishing boat. Thank God Jesus loved him more fiercely than that!

That brings me to what I have titled the subversive hope of Easter. I am heartened to know that when we make a mess of things and find ourselves in that place of remorse and regret, we can trust that God will meet us with the same acceptance and love and forgiveness that we see Jesus offering to his disciples. That is good news. But even more than that, I find great hope in the fierceness of God's love that does not leave us on our own when we are *blind* to the mess we are making of things.

Here the story from Acts comes alive for me. Saul is part of the power brokers of Jerusalem. He is connected. He has authority. He rules through terror breathing threats and murder against the member of *The Way* as Luke calls these early followers of Jesus. When I look around the world, at our own nation, even at the power brokers closer to home - when I consider how intractable problems like racism and poverty and hunger, unemployment, homophobia, and gun violence can seem – it is easy to despair. Part of what contributes to that sense of despair is how those in power come at these problems with vastly different perspectives. They can't even agree on what the root causes are let alone how to go about dismantling the systems that keep those root causes in place. The passion and conviction from all sides seems impervious to change. People are blind to what they are doing. And it feels hopeless to me at times that anything substantive will ever change.

And then we hear this story from the book of Acts and I remember again how subversive our God can be. Piercing light right into the heart of one of the most violent perpetrators of injustice

who terrorized the earliest believers. One of the commentaries I was reading this week pointed out that Saul first appears in the book of Acts at the stoning of Stephen.³ The witnesses to that stoning laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul and then it tells us that as Stephen was dying he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice “Lord, do not hold their sin against them” and then he died. And it tells us that Saul approved of their killing him. What is said of Saul as he began ravaging the church as the book of Acts puts it was a plea for his forgiveness. I realize that the light that pierced his heart began with that declaration of forgiveness. I couldn’t help wondering that if part of what made it possible for Saul to finally hear the voice of Jesus in his life was the persistent witness of the followers of Jesus that he was chasing. Hearing Stephen speak forgiveness in the face of such cruelty must have haunted his soul. I suspect he ran up against that same kind of nonviolent resistance over and over again until finally, the clarity of what he was doing pushed him to his knees.

In the symbolism of light and blindness and recovery of sight in this story we see the tremendous power God has to subvert darkness. For Saul the time of darkness when he was blinded was the time when he finally began to see for the first time what was real and true. His recovery of sight came only after the scales fell from his eyes and he looked out at the world from an entirely new perspective.

That gives me hope that the witness of God’s people can undermine even the most violent and persistent of threats; that God can subvert darkness itself to be used as a tool of the light; that even when we are completely blind to our own failures God loves us fiercely enough to bring us to our knees. Once I begin looking for it I can see this subversive hope of Easter at work all around me: in politicians suddenly standing for equality after years of justifying exclusion; in families finding forgiveness after decades of stubborn grudges; in a struggling teenager finally finding her place and her voice in the world after years of alienation and self-loathing.

As I look at the world, at our own nation, even at the challenges of my own life when I am tempted to despair that nothing of substance can ever change, I turn again to these stories of resurrection and begin to see with new eyes.

Jesus Christ is risen.

The subversive power of resurrection is alive and well.

Thanks be to God!

³ Robert W. Wall, *Feasting on the Word Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 403.