

Change of Life and Heart

Third Sunday of Easter

Celebration of Earth Day

April 19, 2015

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Texts: Acts 3.12-19;
Psalm 148;
1 John 3.1-7;
Luke 24.36b-48

Worship during Eastertide has to be one of the high points of the year for me. We make space during Lent for really honest self-reflection. We plumb the depths of human suffering as we walk through Holy Week. Just in time before it becomes more than we can bear, Easter arrives to declare that there is a reality that is deeper and more true than the pain and suffering and brokenness of the world. When we say “Christ is Risen” we are basking in the glory and wonder of God. We celebrate the tenacity of life, the healing power of love, and the scandalous nature of forgiveness. Seven weeks we sit in this space. We even set aside confession because this is not about us and our failures but about God and what God can do and is doing in us and among us. We simply dwell in praise.

There are some seasons that take us into their themes slowly, subtly. Not Easter. Easter breaks in! Easter comes as an intrusion disrupting the sorrow and grief of Good Friday. There is an interesting dimension of mistaken identity in these early resurrection stories. In Luke just before this passage we have the road to Emmaus where the disciples don't know that it is Jesus walking with them on the road. John gives us a similar story with Mary in the garden. I wonder if the meaning for us in these accounts is the way in which the thought of resurrection is so foreign that we cannot even register the possibility when we are so immersed in the pain of our own suffering.

On Thursday night I had the honor and privilege of offering the invocation at the Center for Women in Transition fundraising event. One part of the evening was hearing the testimony of one of the former clients of CWI. She

told her story fearlessly. She shared the horrific suffering she endured in her first marriage for years. Honestly the things her husband demanded of her and the ways that he controlled every aspect of her life was so painful and twisted. When I try to imagine myself inside of that kind of suffering – when I imagine feeling trapped inside that kind of hopelessness – if the risen Jesus was standing in front of me, I don't think I'd recognize him. I'd have no category for that kind of hope.

What she described next was the way that hope burst its way through the haze of hopelessness. In the midst of one of his most violent attacks suddenly something clicked inside of her. She reached out to the Center for Women in Transition and the wheels of her new life were set in motion. Where she is today five years later is nothing short of miraculous! In that moment, I understood more viscerally what this strange dimension of the resurrection stories is all about.

When Jesus first arrives on the scene the psychological and emotional and spiritual space the disciples are in requires him first to simply come alongside of them and prepare them to receive what he is ready to give. In this passage from Luke today when Jesus shows up they have been partially prepared to see him. And yet still when he arrives they are startled; not because they hadn't heard that he was alive but because the trauma and the grief of all they have been through didn't yet leave room for them to fully grasp what God was doing in their midst.

Go back and track the language through this passage and you will see that what Luke presents to us in this one encounter is a compact version of the existential journey we move through as human beings from despair to hope to new life. They are startled and terrified. They feel joy when they contemplate what might be possible but that joy is muted by the wonderment and questioning that lingers until Jesus has been with them for some time and given them space to touch his wounds and to remember all that they have been through – to break bread with him (which will do in a moment) – then to hear where all of this is leading.

Then passage ends with words of commissioning: you have been witness to these things so that you can bring this good news to the world. Now I

have to confess that when I saw the word “repentance” in that final verse I had an internal “ach!” go off in my head. We just came through Lent – do we really have to pick up the repentance language again so soon? It isn’t just here in Luke but carries over into Acts and the same ideas are present in 1 John. Then I ran across this verse in the Common English Bible. Here is how Luke ends in that translation: “This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations...”

Change your hearts and live. That sounds about right actually. Somehow the word *Repent!* holds connotations of judgment. I hear the harsh tones of a self-righteous prophet in my ears or the prim and proper voice of the puritanical Church Lady (I know this dates me) from Saturday night live. We have got to drop those overtones. They do not capture what Jesus is looking for with his disciples or what God is looking for with us.

And at the same time, we have to contend with the fact that leaving us to our own devices is no gift on God’s part. Look at the state of the world. We celebrate Earth day this week. Clearly we cannot be left to our own devices. Destruction and devastation is what we, as human beings, leave in our wake. Thankfully, we have not been left to ourselves. We have seen what it looks like in the person of Jesus to have a change of heart and the kind of life that flows from that change.

There was a beautiful article in the *New York Times* on April 11th by David Brooks in which he described people “radiating an inner light.” He captured in very contemporary categories what it looks like to have a change of heart and life: “These people can be in any walk of life. They seem deeply good. They listen well. They make you feel funny and valued. You often catch them looking after other people and as they do so their laugh is musical and their manner is infused with gratitude. They are not thinking about what wonderful work they are doing. They are not thinking about themselves at all.”¹ He is convinced that people like this who radiate

¹ You can read the full article here: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/opinion/sunday/david-brooks-the-moral-bucket-list.html?_r=0

inner light are not born but made. Here are the kinds of shifts you need to make to be that kind of person: shifts toward humility, dependency, confronting your weakness, finding an energizing love. In Christian circles, we speak of this as the work of spiritual formation.

When I think about this formation work in light of Earth Day, these are things like learning to recycle, reducing your carbon foot print, minimizing the disposable goods you use in your daily life. These are the habits that we need to internalize if we are to make lasting change.

But something I learned from Peter Boogaart is that the most powerful force for change will come as we immerse ourselves in the natural world and develop a love for this creation God has given us. That is what worship in Eastertide is all about. There are most definitely habits of heart and life that need our attention. But for this season, let's just immerse ourselves in the indescribable beauty and wonder of the resurrection. Let's just celebrate the tenacity of life, the healing power of love, and the scandalous nature of forgiveness. Let's dwell here and let this time, this worship, prepare us for those moments when new life is ready to burst forth within us, around us, maybe even through us.

Jesus Christ IS risen - Alleluia!

Amen.