

The Resurrected One

Easter Sunday

March 27, 2016

Jill R. Russell

Texts: Acts 10.34-43;
Psalm 118;
1 Corinthians 15.19-26;
John 20.1-18

In this midst of this most festive, celebratory day, I want to open some space right here for just a moment for a reality check – a gut check if you will. I'm not going to ask you to literally raise your hand but I am going to ask you to do a quick internal check if I hit upon some territory of the mental space you find yourself today. For some of you, while you may have found yourself swept into the spirit of this day – music, atmosphere has a way of doing that– if you were really honest it seems like a bit of a stretch to claim as I did with the children a few moments ago that God, and the ways of God, are more powerful than anything in the universe. Or maybe it is the whole premise behind it that Jesus who died was somehow resurrected back to life. All of it seems rather fantastical and beyond realm of reality.

Or maybe that it isn't where your mind goes. You are not in some intellectual struggle with what did or didn't happen on that morning. No for you it's this moment of looking around at the world and the insanity that is our political system -the vitriol that has taken over our country – the racism that seems to be getting worse not better - the violence that is escalating around the globe – the human suffering that truly overwhelms the soul if you stop long enough to take it in. How can we begin to claim that God and the ways of God are more powerful than anything in the universe?

And it's not just out there in the world...it's right here in the middle of our lives. On Thursday afternoons I meet with students from the seminary who are in a pastoral care and counseling class. I am their lab instructor where they get to practice these skills. This past Thursday, which was Maundy Thursday, a student opened our session with a prayer from Walter Brueggeman's from his collection (which I love) called *Awed to*

Heaven, Rooted in Earth – I want to share just a segment of that prayer to bring a bit more of the reality of our lives into this moment.

“ You are the God from whom no secret can be hid,
and we are a people with many secrets,
 that we want to tell for the sake of our lives,
 that we dare not tell because they are deep and painful...
You are the God of all truth,
and now we bid you heed our truth,
about which we will not bear false witness...
 the truth of grief unresolved,
 the truth of pain unacknowledged,
 the truth of fear too child-like,
 the truth of hate, as powerful as it is deep,
 the truth of being taken advantage of,
 and being used,
 and manipulated,
 and slandered.”¹

Have I ticked enough of the places where we really are on this Easter day?

So let me add another claim to this day: Easter does not require us to hide any of those truths I have just named. In fact, being very real about the spaces where we sit this day positions us perfectly to enter into the text before us. The disciples – the ones who eventually become the apostles who bring Jesus forward to us - they are precisely in the spaces I have just named. They are filled with grief that Jesus is gone and with him all of their hope for a better world. They are wrestling with guilt and shame for having abandoned Jesus and betrayed him. They are frightened wondering whether the soldiers will be coming from them next. As the morning unfolds, they are confused beyond belief. Mary comes first and finds the stone rolled away. She runs to the disciples and tells them that Jesus is gone and they don't where they have taken his body. Peter and the other disciple run to the grave. They see his burial clothes set aside and while John believes Peter is confused. It tells us that the disciples did not yet understand the scriptures that Jesus must rise from the dead. They both go

¹ Excerpt from Walter Brueggemann, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth: Prayer of Walter Brueggemann*, “A people with many secrets”, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 25.

home while Mary stays, overwhelmed with her grief. She weeps when Jesus comes to her. Even then she does not recognize him and takes him for the gardener. Guilt and grief, belief mingled with confusion...this IS Easter.

Jesus, the resurrected One, seeks them out in precisely those places. When I speak about God and the ways of God as being more powerful than any other force in this universe, this is what I'm talking about. Is it amazing to consider the kind of power that can bring life back into a body that has been dead? Absolutely! It's actually quite unbelievable. If that is the sticking point for you, if you struggle with the believability of that claim, don't get stuck there because that is actually not the power that I am speaking about. The power that I am speaking about is when Jesus - the one who was persecuted and tortured; the one who was cast aside, abandoned, and betrayed by those he loved - when Jesus seeks *those very ones* out in the midst of their shame, and guilt, and grief and offers to them something totally unexpected and completely undeserved: Forgiveness, kindness, tenderness, embrace.

James Alison in his book, *Knowing Jesus*, makes the claim that the only reason we know anything about Jesus is because of these encounters. We wouldn't have the written gospels without these encounters. It's not as if people understood as it was happening the significance of Jesus life and teachings such that people were following him around taking notes to pass along to us. In fact, the writers of the gospels make no effort to cover up the fact that no one understood Jesus while he was alive. It's only after all of these events takes place that they begin to understand the power of God and of God's ways. It's only after Jesus becomes victim to all of these forces I named a few moments ago - clashes of power, hatred between groups, political vitriol, police brutality, good people turning a blind eye to injustice, friends running scared, taking cover. When those friends are cowering in fear, shrinking in shame, confused and heart broken, that is when Jesus, the Resurrected One, comes to them. In fact, they are the only ones to whom the resurrected Jesus appears. The ones who had been walking with him and following after him, whose failure to stand by him, must have been (on the emotional and spiritual level anyway) the most excruciating part of the whole ordeal.

Jesus does not return to the places of power to demand that his name be cleared. He does not rally troops to defend his honor. He does not come to

his disciples to chastise them or put them in their place. All the cycles of attack and defense in which we are so well schooled – he lays them down. He stands instead ready to embrace us as we grieve, to engage us around our doubt, to forgive us in our guilt, to release us from our shame. Jesus sets in motion a whole new way of living and that my friends is the power of God and of God’s ways.

Within these encounters, and we read several of them in the coming weeks of Eastertide, Jesus dismantles all the assumptions we hold about the world in which we live. Where shame and guilt, fear and doubt can fuel our separation from each other and feed the cycles of reactivity that are so rampant in our world. Someone hurts me? I lash out at them or pull away to protect myself so that it never happens again. When Jesus becomes the victim of the spewing hatred and injustice of the world, what he does with his resurrected life is to move right back into the center of those fractured and broken relationships to offer something they never could have imagined possible: forgiveness, comfort, empowerment, renewal.

“We meet Jesus (Allison writes) as the resurrected one - the one who, after those closest to him have betrayed him and left him to die alone, returns as the source of grace and hope to those treacherous and fearful friends.”² Those encounters changed the disciples. From then on, they bear witness to the resurrected one. Their witness is what gives to us Jesus. Mary returns from the garden with a very simple message: “I have seen the Lord”

As she tells the story, others see the Lord through her. And it transforms them too. And they tell their story and on and on it goes until we are gathered here this day as ones who seek comprehend what it means that the Resurrected One comes to us – where we live – in the midst of the mess of this world.

If you are among those who have seen the Lord, lend your voice to be the first and strongest Alleluia on this day. And tell us your story so that we can see the Lord through you.

Jesus Christ is Risen -- Alleluia – Amen.

² James Allison, *Knowing Jesus*, (Springfield, Illinois: Templegate Publishers, 1994), vii.