

*Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*

Third Sunday of Easter

April 15, 2018

Gordon Wiersma

Text: Acts 3

I John 3

Luke 24

When you come to church, do you expect to hear what's wrong with you or what's right with you? And what about in general – for someone who is not a part of a church – or just not here today ☺ – do you think the general impression of CHURCH is that the focus is on what's wrong with you or what's right with you? Well my gut feeling is that generally people think of church as a place where you'll hear what's wrong with you more than what's right – and that is an impression that often sours people from church. Well, so, maybe that's their problem – if you can't deal with facing your faults, then so be it; we can't sugar coat things just to be nice. But, maybe, instead of that rather defensive response – what if we tried something different than the picture of church as a tracking what's wrong and right – tried something about faith that speaks to life in a different way.

I want to tell you about a scene from a movie from 1991- a movie titled *Grand Canyon* – I saw it in the theater way back then and a few times after – if you can track it down to watch, I think it's a really good movie. Despite the title, it's set in Los Angeles, and the opening scene made a lasting impression on me: a wealthy white attorney is downtown late at night and his car breaks down in what we see as an unfamiliar, run-down neighborhood. While he waits for a tow truck, he is confronted by some African-american gang members and violence seems inevitable - currents of class and race and violence and stereotypes are flowing strongly. And then a tow truck arrives, and an African-american driver steps out to do his job, but first he must talk to the gang leader. The tow truck driver says, “Man, the world ain't supposed to work like this. Maybe you don't know that, but this ain't the way it's supposed to be. I'm

supposed to be able to do my job without askin' you if I can. And that dude is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you rippin' him off. Everything's supposed to be different than what it is here." The story goes on in many layers, dealing with many of those currents of race and class, fear and violence – all in conversation with what I believe is some profound tow-truck driver theology: "this ain't the way it's supposed to be."

Do you see the theology? - it asserts that as we look at our lives and world, this isn't 'just the way it is' or 'the best we can do' – no – this is 'not the way it's supposed to be' – instead life is created and possible to be something full and fruitful rather than fractured and fatal. That's different than starting with 'what's wrong with you' or 'what's right with you' – it starts from a place of yearning: grief and hope together – it is a desire for thriving, community, connection. It is a statement of faith to look at life and say: "this ain't the way things are supposed to be."

So with all that in mind, let's take a look at these scripture passages – in which you could see a lot of talk about what's wrong with people. Look at Acts – Peter tells the crowd in no uncertain terms: 'you killed God's servant, Jesus, choosing a murderer over the Author of life' – not exactly a crowd-pleasing sermon. But I was struck by a remarkable word in the Acts passage: "friends" – that's what Peter calls the crowd, the people who have killed Jesus – "friends" – don't tell me there's any way you would predict that from Peter – maybe "people", probably "sinners", not "friends" – "friends, you and your leaders didn't know what you were doing – God used what happened in Jesus to show that there is a different way – you can turn from sin and turn to life.' It is a remarkably intimate invitation from Peter, and it's done not in a setting of judgment but in response to the healing of a man's broken body. Peter says that all the violence and brokenness that coalesced around the life of Jesus – that's not the way it is supposed to be; Jesus is the Author of Life, and we want you to join us in that path of life – of a way we're created to be.

How about I John – what do we see there? – you could see a lot about what’s wrong – talking about sin and lawlessness, about who’s righteous and doing what’s right. But what grabs my attention is this: ‘through God’s love you are children of God’ – we’re in a world that does not center itself in that identity of love and connection to God, that veers from God’s intention for life, for love and community among one another – and that’s not how it’s supposed to be.

What do we see in Luke 24? You could hear Jesus speaking to what’s wrong – he sees fear and doubt in his disciples – they don’t know how to make sense of their Lord who has died and now appears alive - so you could hear Jesus speaking to their misunderstanding, their deficiency in understanding scripture. But what grabs my attention is this: “Peace be with you” – the greeting heard again and again from the Risen Christ – ‘peace – shalom – fulness – life – hope – peace – shalom.’ As Jesus is present to these fearful, joyful, believing, disbelieving, people, he is among them as PEACE – the embodiment of how God made us to live, to be – the way it’s supposed to be.

That Luke passage concludes with Jesus telling his followers that they will be his witnesses – and I am saying today that an essential part of our witness is to proclaim: “this ain’t the way it’s supposed to be”! – a witness of yearning and hope, honesty and purpose. An in our place and time that is an especially important witness because in our world there are voices that speak very differently – with cynicism, with despair, with indifference; with fear; in the midst of those voices, we are a witness that this is not how God has created life to be AND that there is a different way – a way like this: a faith that even in fierce truth speaks of one another as friends, even our enemies; a faith that speaks of one another as children of God, created to live in love and goodness and hope; a faith that receives “Peace” – Shalom, as the blessing from God to us, and our blessing to one another and our world – the abundance of life for all. What if that’s what you expected to hear about when you came to church? – what if that’s the reputation church had in people’s minds? – a place that speaks to human yearning and hope,

honest about our fears and courageous in our purpose. I suppose that such a church would still speak a lot about right and wrong, but it would do so because the choices we make matter to our witness that is rooted and expressed in shalom.

In that story from Acts, Peter offers a most remarkable name for Jesus – the “Author of Life” – I think that is so beautiful and powerful. And it’s the reason that “not how it’s supposed to be” is a yearning that draws us towards hope – because the Author of life has a different story for our world; the Living Word through whom creation flowed into being now speaks a new creation: Peace. The Spirit of the Risen Christ is present with us to author wholeness, healing, righteousness, community, love, hope – peace - shalom – true life. What if the reputation for church was that it was a community created and blessed by Peace from the Author of Life – a place that connects to our yearnings for something more, better; a place where we can be honest about our brokenness, our faults and fears, our divisions and doubts; a place to know ourselves loved as children of God, and to know others to be so too; a place to be nurtured in righteousness and peace. For those who know this is not the way the world’s supposed to be, the Author of Life hosts us at this table to be a part of the community created in his Peace – to witness that true life is still being authored in and through and around us – and we are witnesses that that’s the way it is. Thanks be to God. AMEN.