

“AN IDLE TALE”

Robin E. Lostetter

First Presbyterian Church, Bordentown NJ

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Acts 10:34-43, I Cor 15:19-26, Luke 23:50-24:12

Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened. (Luke 24:10-12)

So what amazed him? That Jesus wasn't in the tomb? Or that the women were right? Women weren't allowed to serve as witnesses in those days, so I'm guessing both things surprised Peter.

And now, lest you think that I'm going to spend the next 10 minutes beating up on men, please relax! Instead, I'm afraid my target may be orthodoxy!

Many of you know that I've only been at First Presbyterian Church for a little over two months, and that part of my call here is to function as an interim pastor would . . . to stir things up a bit, to help the congregation think outside the box, and to move on to something more glorious than we even imagine in our routine way of being church. And I'm taking that as permission to step outside the expected box of a routine Easter sermon.

Yes, I want us to be joyful and sing Alleluias! But I'm afraid the Easter story has become for many "an idle tale", just as it was for Peter and the other apostles. It's especially so if we've divorced it from the terrible story of that first Good Friday — all the political machinations, the fear and jealousy of the spiritual leaders, the brutality of Roman executions — all the reasons that Jesus was crucified, the instruments of death which he overcame, and the ministry which he commissioned afterwards.

So what I really would like to have happen, is for faith, hope, and love to be resurrected in our very lives . . . both our personal lives, and our corporate life as a congregation. Don't misunderstand me: I think this congregation shows great love within the congregation and out into the hurting and broken world around us. And I'm not questioning your faith, either. But I am sensing that faith is sometimes viewed as being in conflict with love of neighbor, and also, that our hope for a bright future is sometimes tentative. So let me share a few stories of resurrection with you, along with a couple of audacious comments from some of my colleagues.

Let's start by addressing **hope**, and let's begin with the audacious comments! They're the ones that motivated me to this sermon after all.

First a one-liner, from a colleague in ministry. "Jesus is alive - and you're not!"

This gem was a summary response to a longer and more serious quotation from theologian Alan Lewis, who was pondering the silent day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.¹ He writes:

"What confronts the church is an Easter Saturday challenge: are we willing to enter an era where the ministry dies to its old self, cedes its former glories, lets go its prerogatives and perquisites of power, buries its hierarchy, its masculinity and exclusiveness, and negates its [Gentile] forms of dominance? Thus, and ...only thus, might we be ready for rebirth..."

Hard words. But the truth is, without Good Friday, there would have been no Easter Sunday. And Lewis seems to be saying we're in the tomb between those two days; that without dying to the parts of the past that

hold us back, we cannot move forward.

I'm not so sure I agree that we're in the tomb. Pruning is only effective if it is done to a living branch, while still connected to the body of the plant – think of Jesus' words, that he is the vine and we are the branches. Pruning is a very biblical concept, as well as one understood by gardeners and naturalists for generations. In John we read, “Every branch that bears fruit [God] prunes to make it bear more fruit.”⁴² So I don't believe we're in the tomb, because there's no question we're bearing good spiritual and missional fruit. Nevertheless, the branch can't grow new life if it's weighed down by wilting blooms.

I just bought a gardenia plant. They hold special meaning for me, because my dad gave me my first one, and it bloomed for years. The one I just bought is laden with buds . . . 2 and 3 at the ends of more than half its branches. And it will be painful for me to cut at least half of those healthy buds off. But if I don't, I know from experience that the plant can't support them all, and most will turn yellow, die, and fall off. The only hope for new blooms is a judicious pruning.

In the same way, our hope for the future, as a church, as THE church, and as this congregation, is to discern what produces good fruit and what needs to be given a decent burial. The same goes for us as individuals. To be resurrected, to embrace new life, we sometimes have to let go of things that are holding us back, or address things that are unhealthy in our lives.

An internet blog asked readers to respond to the following statement in 100 words or less: “Why I Need The Resurrection”. Boston pastor Karla Miller wrote, “I need the resurrection because every day I die a thousand little deaths...when I curse the bad drivers in Boston, when I fail to be present to an outstretched hand in the square, when I get irritated with [someone] who isn't playing nice, when my heart breaks as I listen to the news, see the stray dog running loose in traffic, and when, to my surprise, the tulips are beginning to bloom. Resurrection reminds me that mercy and life are new, everyday, every moment.”³

Resurrection for us is not a 3-day process, as it was for Jesus. I doubt that Miller stopped cursing bad drivers or dealt more effectively with pan-handlers overnight. But I suspect, since these are things that she felt caused her to “die a thousand little deaths”, that she began pruning them from her life whenever she became aware of them in a strong moment — likely assisted by a little prayer we often mutter, “Oh God! What is *wrong* with these people?” And she was encouraged by resurrection all around her, symbolized for her this spring by tulips in bloom.

Here's another hopeful response to that same statement, this time from Monica Coleman: “To break bread with people who have hurt you, and to retell stories that have lost meaning in today's apathy and nihilism – is grace. The mystery is not that some people cannot do this; the mystery is that any of us can. Finding life after death is divine activity. Our wills and fortitudes alone shrivel with the task. God [alone] maintains hope amidst death.”

Well, that'll preach! That's another ingredient in hope . . . God is in control, you aren't. Once we get past our stubborn independence and self-sufficiency in the areas where it won't work, that is a very reassuring, comforting, and rest-ful truth. With God's help, we can all take small steps toward resurrection.

Expanding on that thought, a physician who is also a cancer survivor, reflects on how faith is life-giving in the context of a cancer support group: “God has a purpose for them and is in control and they don't have to be. This is where mental health comes from. [Such a strongly-held conviction] frees them and reminds them that their illness can result in ‘something good.’”⁴ That “something good” is resurrection. And it's promised to

us, as Paul writes in Romans, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” (8:28)

Two more responses, and then I’ll move on: Shane Mullin wrote, “In a world where things are often not as they should be (injustice, indifference, selfishness, despair), the resurrection of Jesus offers me a lens through which I am able to see and know things as they were intended to be. This is a lens I need. The Resurrection means that I can not only embrace God’s promise of a better world, but I can also choose to participate in this abundance because death succumbs to life. I need the lens of Resurrection so that amidst deficiency, I can see what it means to choose love over anything that isn’t love.”

And this one from Amy Julia Becker: “Shower, breakfast, kids to school, myself to work, go running, make dinner, kids to bed, check email, sleep. It’s easy to forget. But after the earthquake in Haiti, I need the resurrection. When my friend’s parents die in a plane crash, I need the resurrection. When another IED explodes, I need the resurrection. And when I see the flash of blue and yellow of a bird in flight, when apartheid ends, when my kids hold hands, I need the resurrection. In the sorrow and the joy, the resurrection reminds me: goodness will last, light overcomes darkness, life triumphs over death.”

Now let’s take a look at the other concern I raised, that faith is sometimes viewed as being in conflict with love of neighbor. What exactly did I mean by that, you ask? And I will respond by offering you some other questions to ponder . . . I’m offering only questions because this is a very hazardous area in which to venture from the pulpit. Let me begin by saying that one of the most serious concerns that is expressed to me over and over, and which is characteristic of the times we’re living in, is “what about my friends who are Muslim? Jewish? Buddhist? Non-believers?” This question is asked out of compassion and it deserves a response from the Church. So I’m going to go out on a limb, reading again for you, verses from the Book of Acts of the Apostles that we heard earlier. These 3 verses captured my imagination:

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ — he is Lord of all. (10:34-36)

Now remember, Peter is the one who, in this same chapter baptized Cornelius, the Centurion, and had a revelation that freed him from the rules about clean and unclean foods. And Peter is very firm in saying that God shows no partiality between Jews and Gentiles, that he sent his message to Israel, to preach that Jesus is Lord of all.

In the Gospel According to John, this “Lord of all” is again underlined. Jesus says, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” (12:32) Who are we, to challenge that?

And again in John we have another hook to hang our hopes on, in the Good Shepherd passage, where Jesus says:

“I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” (10:14, 16)

My response to “what about my non-Christian neighbor”, in light of scripture, is “I cannot know the mind of God, and I cannot limit God’s grace. I don’t know how God reconciles the world to Godself, but I do know that Jesus accomplished it.”

Alan Lewis asked, "What confronts the church is an Easter Saturday challenge: are we willing to enter an era where the ministry dies to its old self . . . its exclusiveness?" Are we ready for rebirth? Must Easter remain an idle tale, or can we claim resurrection for our very lives? ...for the life of our faith community? ...for the life of the world?

Or will we keep Christ locked up in our – let me see, what were his words? – our old self, former glories, prerogatives and perquisites of power, hierarchy, masculinity, exclusiveness, and dominance? Changing, letting go, dying to self, relinquishing privilege – these things are never easy and sometimes risky.

Shane Claiborne wrote this Holy Week: But “there is a growing movement of Christians who are convinced that our faith is not just a ticket into heaven and an excuse to ignore the hells of the world around us. There is a movement of Christians who know that our Christianity is not just about going up when we die, but bringing God's Kingdom down ... ‘on earth as it is in heaven’, as Jesus said. We are not willing to settle for a Christianity that only promises folks life after death when people are asking... ‘but is there life before death?’”⁵

Let us take a cue from nature . . . the pruned branch will blossom. “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old”, says the Lord. “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Is 43:18) Take heart, see the promise. The tulips are beginning to bloom again!

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

And let all God’s people say, “Amen!”

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ENDNOTES

1. Alan Lewis, author of *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday*, as quoted by Rev. Bill Carter on Facebook, 4/3/10.
2. John 15:1-17, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes (*same Greek word for cleansing*) to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed (*same Greek word for pruning*) by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.”
3. <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Why-I-Need-the-Resurrection.html>
4. Harold G. Koenig, M.D., of the Center for Spirituality, Theology and Health at Duke University, as quoted in “April 3, 2010 - When All You Have Left Is Yourself” in *A Pastor’s Cancer Diary*, <http://www.cewilton.blogspot.com/>.
5. Shane Claiborne, “Death Be Not Proud”, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shane-claiborne/death-be-not-proud_b_524340.html