Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020

*Friends, it is Easter! It is 10:30 Central Time at United Protestant Church of Morgan Park in Duluth, Minnesota. We gather to bear witness, share wonder.*

*You, in your home… it is a gray morning, and we self-isolate, not for fear of the cultural powers that be, but for the safety of us all.*

*But let me welcome you, here and now, to this time of witness and wonder. Let’s tell the story. Let’s live into the story.*

*It begins with the Gospel of John:*

SCRIPTURE:

John 20:1-18  
Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.

Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.

Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

Then the disciples returned to their homes.  
  
But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).

Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

SERMON

Easter Sermon: “Whom are you Looking For?”

Jesus commissions Mary Magdalene to tell the disciples… maybe he knew she’d tell the story straight. (I mean, I have heard the kind of fish stories that men share—it was “this big”!!)

…Then there’s the fish stories of “the one that got away”…

This is what Mary must have been thinking… “the one that got away…”

--As she’s curled in a ball by his tomb, in the cold and lonely cage of sorrow and confusion… “*he was… he was supposed to be… but they killed him. …And he let them kill him*”

Theologian Richard Lischer reminds us (and here, he’s quoting Paul Tillich—another great theologian) that "The *messiah* was ‘born in a grave'". He writes:

Those who skip Thursday and Friday but show up on Easter Sunday are missing the essential truth of the Passion. They also bypass the profound grief that attends Jesus' death. But there's more to it than that. They have also missed one of Jesus' most important lessons before dying. During Holy Week, Jesus teaches the art of losing.

The art of losing… In the very literal sense, Christians come from a long line of losers… and we’ll lose again. We’ll hurt, and cry, and feel desperation…

So why’s the pastor talking about loss and losers on Easter morning?

Because my work, both as a Pastor and a Christian, is to understand resurrection—and know it in my deepest heart! And I think that “loss” might be the in-road to Jesus… that might be what God’s big Messiah lesson is all about here as we walk in our earthly faith. It might just be what God is trying to teach us…

Think of Mary… Doesn’t even recognize Jesus at first… not only for her despair, but also because…it’s so unbelievable… incomprehensible… she is awestruck… dumbfounded… “Wonderment” (as Sigurd Olson was fond of writing)…

Now John is all about resurrection. Light defeats dark…But the story doesn’t *end* with Resurrection. No, friends, crucifixion and resurrection are ongoing…

I think of the song that arose from this narrative: “I come to the garden alone… while the dew is still on the roses” “And he walks with me and he talks with me”

and then that last line: “I’d stay in the garden with him, though the night aroundme be falling, but he bids me go *through* the voice of woe. His voice to me is calling.”… he tells Mary “do not hold onto me…I am ascending to my Father, and your Father, to my God and your God.”

And we? We are called back into this world. A world that is suffering.

…and it might just be that the best way we can practice resurrection now, here in our present lives, is to receive and understand and name and claim loss and brokenness, and know, as Mary learned, as we continue to learn, that loss and brokenness are part of the story, but they are not the end of the story! That’s what we’ve learned!

New life--Resurrected life—cannot be killed. And to quote Barbara Brown Taylor:

New life cannot be killed, and if we remember that then there is nothing we cannot do: move mountains, banish fear, love our enemies, change the world. The only thing we cannot do is hold onto him, instead we must let him take us where he is going. To be with God, a God of the future, drawing us forward into new life.

In her book “Preaching Justice” Chris Smith puts it this way:

Many people in our religious communities speak about resurrection as the dramatic, new life that happens exclusively to individuals after bodily death. However, I believe that Christianity is about forming a people who take seriously resurrection in their everyday lives, and move their bodies and lives into places where their *embodied power* can make a difference. What would it mean if our [ministry] called us to place our flesh and blood wherever people hurt and suffer, wherever the innocent are violated and oppressed, wherever people are struggling for life?

Wherever embodied love and presence exist with vitality and strength, wherever people refuse to abandon life, or whenever the power of death cannot silence the power of life, I believe we are standing in the presence of resurrection. – Chris Smith / Preaching Justice p148

And that’s what we bring to Easter—not that our superhero with God on his side faced death and kicked its butt, but that the Messiah whom God chose FACED death in the first place! Knew—in his bodily pain as he is nailed on that cross, the capacity for evil and fear and violence. Because he knew that if our Christian hearts are open, those would be very prominent experiences in our lives.

--And we are taught to see—not just the idea of resurrection, but the *potential* for resurrection. We are all broken—in our lives we all participate, knowingly or not, in the same ideologies of fear and violence that crucified Jesus. We see it around us. But Jesus teaches us to see the *potential of resurrection--*In ourselves, the potential of resurrection in our community, the potential of resurrection in our world.

Big picture, yes… but resurrection is in the small things. The day-by-day places. And in Christian’s work as a collective.

I think of Paul Hawken–he’s lecturing around the country about the perils of our culture, corporate greed and destruction of our natural balance and the need for change and he hears these examples in the communities he travels to. Small groups of people who take matters of brokenness and crucifixion in their own communities, into their own hands…

He gathered these together to produce his book “Blessed Unrest” one of the most hopeful books I’ve ever read…

I also think of “A Force More Powerful”--the documentary and the book, documenting instances of nonviolent resistance… all the small ways simple people stood up in the face of crucifixion and worked toward resurrection.

It is the daily act. The daily choice.

What are you doing now, here as you listen from home, to keep yourself falling into frustration or anxiety or depression or negativity? We talk about this all the time—the daily choices we make, the ways, every day, that God is walking with you, guiding you.

I think of some of the nuggets of wisdom that we’ve repeated:

…about how many amazingly generative things happen in times of darkness… the seed in the ground, the life in the womb, the soul facing a dark night of difficulty, sorry, fear… Remember, dear friends, that amazing growth happens in the darkest places.

I think of how we share: “Hold your disciplines. Hold your practices” Keep healthy in the physical, the mental, the spiritual—keep reaching out with your senses and with your prayer. Not every day is going to provide great epiphany, but we don’t get up one day and become an elite athlete, we don’t pick up an instrument and become a virtuoso (you saw me on piano!), we don’t pick up a pencil and instantly become a great artist or writer, and we don’t turn to prayer and instantly learn and receive all that God has to share with us.

And when you pray, don’t pretend that you’re somebody that you’re not. Don’t sit well-behaved like an acolyte or an altar boy and say “hey God, all is fine, can’t complain, could be worse” no! Let it out! Let it all out to God. I mean, who are you fooling? God knows who you really are! And God is like a parent when a kid throws a tantrum. Wow! You feel very strongly about this. Are you done yet? Cause when you are, we can get to work. Be yourself and be real before God—God doesn’t need a shell, or a fake person. God calls YOU.

…and in that call… we remember the lamp and the flashlight. Remember this? If you have two means of illumination in your hand, lamp and flashlight, use the lamp. For the flashlight illuminates far ahead or far into the past and prompts something that is not real in the here and now--but the lamp gives you just the first few steps ahead, as God guides you.

I say these things not just to repeat myself, but to share that these are but a few examples of ways that we live into resurrection… they seem small and humble… isolated and individual, to be sure, but…

Ok, let me put it this way…and for the folks in Bible study, I apologize for repeating this story: When my son was younger, he and I were eating a “Tony’s Pizza” –you know, the orangish-yellow box. And on the supreme pizza, there were five—count em—five pepperonis. Just five… and my eight year old son hated the fact that there are just five…

So I took those five pepperoni, put them on a cutting board, and sliced them into many many small pieces, and lo and behold he said:—*wow, that pizza had so much more pepperoni!*

*That’s* how we participate in resurrection. When God bids us “Go” from the garden and live into resurrection, we may think we’re doing it all by our lonesome, and indeed, in our culture we do focus more on the individual than the collective—

But this is to tell you that God works in the small things, and that each one of us, even in our most humble ways, are participants. You… today.

Ongoing resurrection. The messiah is still at work…

I have a friend who used to tell me that she starts her day by saying “God, you’re awesome… thanks for being here today… it’s your day” And she enters her day in anticipation… She has, like so many of us, even in this time, an agenda for the day…a “to do” list. And the day-to-day fills the day but… there’s always an aside: you never know when or how God’s gonna make God’s presence known… you never know when you’re going about your day and *there’s Jesus…*

Like Mary, You may not recognize him… Nothing Jesus has ever did went along the lines of how it was expected to go… nothing he still does…

…Nothing Christians do…

Because we are a resurrection people. Because the Messiah threw us for a loop and because the Messiah continues to throw us for a loop. And we face pain and anger and hurt and death with open hearts and we know, yes, we know, that these forces do not have the last word.

That is the profoundly good news of Easter.

And our response? Humble, simple, loving participation in the ongoing resurrection God creates, through Jesus--and through his disciples that we are now. Easter is not the end of the story. It is the beginning of our ministry. It is what we live into as Christians. It is what we live into as a church.

OFFERING

*Before we turn to prayer, I want to remind all of us that we as a church rely significantly on the money we collect in the offering plates. And we don’t have that now. The ministry still continues, the staff still work, the building still requires heat and electricity. If you are able to do so, please continue your contribution, your offering as you would if you were sitting in the pews this Sunday. You can mail it to us, or run over and drop it in the protected slot in the mailbox.*

PRAYER