

Sermon – April 11, 2021

Scripture Lesson: John 20: 19 – 31

"Practicing Resurrection"

Rev. Gene Nelson, Pastor Emeritus

In his poem, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front", Wendell Berry's mad farmer warns against the love of, "the quick profit, the annual raise, vacation with pay...(against) a cautious life that makes one afraid to know your neighbors and die." (I love Wendell Berry, but wish he couldn't be quite so hard on vacations with pay!) The mad farmer insists that we need to move our lives in a radical new direction, saying, "Each day do something that won't compute. Love the Lord. Love the world. Practice resurrection!"

Turning to our text, it would seem, on the evening of the first Easter, that Jesus' disciples were have a little trouble practicing resurrection. They are fearfully hiding behind locked doors, pretty much afraid of their own shadows. Mary had brought them the wonderful, unbelievable news that she had seen the Lord...Jesus risen from the dead. But her testimony fails to penetrate their fear-driven reality. Maybe they don't believe her; maybe they simply cannot wrap their brains around what her words might mean; maybe the good news of Easter is simply too overwhelming for them or perhaps not as overwhelming as their fear.

We'll never know for sure. But this we do know. The risen Christ does not wait for them to come to a decision, to take a vote, to form a resurrection committee. Suddenly he is there, among them. But curiously, his first words are not all that monumental or memorable: "Peace be with you." It was the most common greeting of the day, what people would say to each other on the street. But this was hardly an ordinary situation. Indeed for the disciples it had not

exactly been an ordinary week. "Peace be with you? Is that the best you can come up with at a time like this?"

Reflecting on these first words spoken by the risen Christ, United Methodist pastor, Kristen Grant, writes, "For Jesus, these words are neither a salutation nor an attempt at ironic humor. They are the fulfillment of a promise. The last time they were together, Jesus told his disciples that, regardless of what they were threatened with in this world, they would share in his peace. But simply saying it had not made it so. Now Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, had come back to make good on that promise. 'Peace be with you.' He says it not once, but three times: 'Peace be with you, for the bonds of death are broken; peace be with you for the bonds of sin and guilt are broken; peace be with you because there is more to this world than meets the eye.'"

Concludes Grant, "The peace Jesus offers is no anesthetic for the soul, no greeting card platitude. It is the beginning of a new world, the long-awaited world of God's shalom. It comes with freedom from fear, sin and death. Jesus opens the door that the disciples had locked, and shows the way to resurrection reality, offering the good news that God's grace can wash away the old life and put a new one in its place." They are now called to move out from behind locked, fearful doors and, in the words of the mad farmer, "practice resurrection." What do you think? Are you ready for that?

Eleven-year-old John witnessed the marriage of his mother to her fifth consecutive alcoholic husband. It took only a few months for John to discover that this was also the fifth consecutive husband who would hit his mother and abuse him and his younger brothers and sisters. His mother had instructed John to hide himself and his siblings whenever the drunken ranting

turned to rage. Sometimes that worked; sometimes it didn't. One night, when the crashing of furniture and his mother's screams began, John hid his sisters in the closet and his brothers under the bed. But this time he didn't want to hide. He ran into his mother's room to protect her, to stop the hitting, to *do* something. His stepfather turned on him. But before many blows had landed, John heard an explosion and the beating stopped as the man fell to the floor. In his mother's hand, he saw the cold steel of a handgun.

What chance does an eleven-year-old have in such an environment? Not much. Unless, of course, someone decides to practice resurrection. The public defender on the case, told a friend the story of John and his family. The friend, Benjamin, knew he couldn't just stand by and do nothing. After all, what would Jesus do? He and his wife came to John's house with food, clothing, a few toys and the offer of a ride to church on Sundays. The children accepted all four offers. When they first came to church, there were some stares, some grumbling and some rough moments. No one was quite sure how to act or what to think. But a number of church members reached out and received John and his siblings warmly. John found most of the talking and sitting rather boring, but there were also things he enjoyed. They had donuts! And they invited him back.

Benjamin spent a lot of time with John and his family. It was not always easy or comfortable. At time it was darn frustrating. John's mother married two more alcoholic and abusive men before dying when John was twenty. Sadly one of his brothers followed the self-destructive path of his step-fathers. But always Benjamin was there for them. Today, two of John's sisters are school teachers. And John? Last week he preached his 35th Easter sermon. Largely through the care and persistence of Benjamin and his church community, for John and his family a door of pain

and anger and fear was unlocked and new life unleashed. You just never know. “Love the Lord. Love the world. Practice resurrection.”

The disciples were not exactly models of courage and faith, but I don’t want to be too hard on them... not this year, not in these times. They had lived through a terrible brutal, violent, bloody week...a week that seemed intent on crushing all their hopes and dreams. When you think about it, the week we call holy tells some gritty, realistic stories of betrayal, arrest, falsehoods, mobs, violence and death. Sound familiar to anyone? As one preacher has said, “Some years we preachers must labor to make connections between the gospel and our lives. This past Holy week, the world did all that for us.” Think of the past year...for us, staying behind the locked doors of our homes has been the safest thing to do. Who knew how dangerous it could be just to breathe the same air as the person next to you? Then you add the violence of January 6th , the recent uptick in gun violence and deaths, and yes, the world has at times seemed – and continues to seem – to be a dangerous place. And so, I find it easier, in this Eastertide, to feel some sympathy for those frightened, disoriented disciples.

In fact, as I think about it, who better to comment on these uncertain times than of my favorite theologians, Linus of “Peanuts” fame. He says to his psychiatrist, Lucy, “I’m in sad shape. My life is full of fear and anxiety. The only thing that keeps me going is this blanket...I need help!”

Dr. Lucy responds, “Well, as they say on TV, the mere fact that you realize you need help indicates that you are not that far gone. I think that we had better try to pinpoint your fears. If we can find out what it is you’re afraid of, we can label it. Are you afraid of responsibility? If you are, then you have hypengyophobia.” “No,” he says, “I don’t think that is quite it.” How about

cats? If you're afraid of cats you have ailurophobia." He answers, "Well sort of, but I'm not sure." "Are you afraid of staircases?" she asks. "If you are then you have climacophobia." He isn't too sure about that either. So finally she says, "Maybe you have pantophobia. Do you think you might have pantophobia?" "What's that?" "It's the fear of everything." To which he cries out, "That's It!!!" Seems that there is a lot of that going around lately. It feels like everything has been upside down for so long.

My mind goes back to that first Easter evening, to that pitiful group of fearful and timid disciples, cowering behind a locked door, hoping against hope that no one knows who or where they are. Their present seems pretty grim; their future looks even worse. But just then, their risen Lord pushes through the locked door and stands among them. And to this doubting, hopeless group a spirit is given; to this group who feared they had nothing, Christ gives everything – hope, spirit, forgiveness, peace, a sense of mission. Again, the good news is that Jesus does not wait for us to come to him. What is Easter if not Jesus coming to us, reaching out across the great dark abyss of death and telling us to be at peace? What is Easter if not the proclamation that God is not finished, God is not stumped, that God will get what God wants. God has chosen sides; even in a pandemic, perhaps especially in a pandemic, God has chosen hope, God has chosen life. And it just might now be our job, after the darkness and despair of Holy Week, indeed of the year, 2020, to stand up, point to the risen Christ present among us and joyfully preach – There he is. He's back!"

But be ready, for he may come to us incognito, in surprising ways. When Mary Magdalene first encountered the risen Christ, she thought he was a gardener. Today he may appear as a doctor or nurse bending over a COVID patient; perhaps as a first responder; as a dedicated teacher

with 20 masked third graders; as a chaplain, with her prayer book, alone with a body at a crematorium; perhaps as a young witness willing to risk herself and tell the truth in a time when we have been worn to the nub by all the lying. Perhaps even as one of us, bringing groceries to a home bound neighbor.

What do you think? Are you prepared to meet the Risen One in our midst? Are you ready to open a locked door? Are you ready to embrace a hope based, not on what we do but on what God has done and continues to do? Even when there seems to be more darkness than light, are we prepared to be a part of Christ's risen life on earth, a people – a community – formed from nothing less than the creative breath of Christ himself who even now stands among us, calling us to a life of justice and mercy and faith.

Some church members were reminiscing about the history of their small church, its ups and downs, the high points and valleys of despair. One of them said, "When I think about all this church has been through, the troubles we've faced, the fact that we are still here, still in this place as a church, is a testimony to the great power of God. If God hadn't wanted us to be here, we sure would never have made it." Another person added, "You know, we may be the only evidence that God raised Jesus from the dead on Easter."

At the end of Toni Morrison's classic novel, "Beloved", Paul D tells Sethe, both of them former slaves, burdened with a past of unspeakable pain, " Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow."

This is precisely what Easter offers us....some kind of tomorrow, a tomorrow that makes a full life today possible. Dare to walk through the door. Dare to believe. Dare to be the evidence. Dare to practice resurrection!

Closing Prayer:

What have I to dread, what have I to fear, leaning on the everlasting arms.

I have blessed peace, with my Lord so near, leaning on the everlasting arms.