



PRACTICING RESURRECTION

John 20:1-18

Practicing Resurrection means truly knowing and loving others because we are truly known and loved by God.

The Despair of Darkness

"Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark."

Our passage begins this morning in darkness. It is the time in the morning when things are not quite easy to make out. Our eyes are barely opened, and yet here is this fast paced narrative, which includes a scene of two men running together—almost like a race. They see things they don't understand. And Mary stands alone...outside the tomb, weeping.

The contrast between darkness and light is a theme that runs throughout the gospel of John. In our scene, Mary, Simon Peter, and John all seem to lack a sense of clarity about what was happening. After all of this time listening to the teachings of Jesus, after all that the disciples have heard and seen, they are still oblivious as to what is about to happen.

It is a world shaped by darkness. Their Rabbi has just been executed. Their hopes and dreams have now been crushed, tortured and crucified on a Roman cross. They are trapped in the world as it is, with absolutely no hope, unable to believe that the world can be different, that their situation can be different. As followers of Jesus, they have become the hated, scorned, abhorred, detested, despised, and rejected. They are in a brutal city riddled with bloodshed, and they are unwelcome. Without Jesus to lead them, they perhaps have no where to go, no where left to belong, no people to belong to. They will go back to homes where they are likely unwelcome.

They thought Jesus would bring hope for all of Israel, that he would be crowned their Messiah. But their hope was nailed to a tree on Friday. Now it is Sunday, the first day of the week, and it is still dark.

Mary begins walking through the garden, asking strangers where Jesus' body has been taken.

And then...
in the darkness...
someone whispers her name...
"Mary."
And her life is changed forever!

When Jesus speaks our name, it is as if the light of life finally comes on in our soul. The power of Resurrection begins to take over. We see the world anew, like we have never seen it before. We see who we are, we see the world as it is meant to be. One of my deepest prayers is to help us as a congregation come to see ourselves as people who help shine the light of life on a world filled with darkness, that we would be people who learn to practice Resurrection,

Practice Resurrection

Practice Resurrection? What does it mean to practice Resurrection?

I think that if we get this right, it will change everything about how we see our faith.

This simple question—what does it look like to put Resurrection into practice—is critical to understanding the nature of the Church, that community founded on the proclamation that Christ has risen from the dead. To understand what it means to practice Resurrection, we first need to know what we mean by Resurrection.

Resurrection

We miss the power of the Resurrection if we only think about it in terms of the immortality of the soul or life in the hereafter. For me, it is about the ability to experience the fullness of life. It is about victory, victory over the power over Death—Death with a capital D. It is about the light of life finally shining in the darkness.

The word Resurrection has the same Latin root as our English word resurge. It literally means to “rise again.” More specifically, it means to rise from the dead. The very notion of resurrection assumes that a death has happened; Resurrection cannot happen without there first being a death. But we know that it is not just about dead bodies that don’t stay dead, what we might today call zombies. No, resurrection is about a new life that has come in spite of death. It is about a death-denying power. It is about hope in the face of despair. It is about light bringing an end to darkness.

In that sense, Resurrection is not just about dead bodies rising, but about a specific kind of power—the power of a life so determined, so tenacious, so unshakably rebellious that it rises even in the face of death. It is the beauty of knowing that life, not Death, has the last word.

When I think of death, I think about more than just the death of the human body. The theologian and Harlem Human-Rights lawyer, William Stringfellow taught me to think about the power Death holds over us. Death with a capital D is a controlling force that holds sway over our lives, a living morality. Death is a “matrix of enslaved existence.” Capital D Death works like a synonym for the spirituality of idolatry, domination, and empire. The moral reality of death permeates everything in our lives. With Death exercising dominion over us, the world runs upside-down from the way it was created to be.

The Resurrection of Jesus, however, frees us from Death’s power over us. Resurrection is the ability to live free from the power that Death would otherwise hold on our lives. As Stringfellow put it, since fear of Death is the only power that the principalities have over us, we become freed to live as full human beings.

In the Resurrection, we are freed to honor life as a gift.

In the Resurrection, we are freed to live by grace.

In the Resurrection, we are no longer afraid we might fail, no longer afraid of judgement.

In the Resurrection, we finally see the world in God's light, as it is and as it can be, free from the darkness of the power of Death.

In the divine power of fearless love that stands rebelliously in face of Death, in the Resurrection, we free to be fully human.

Only then are able to be faithful to God—because we are finally able to be what God created us to be.

Stringfellow says that this is what it means to live according to the Word of God:

I am called in the Word of God—as is everyone else—to the vocation of being human, nothing more and nothing less ... In the face of death, live humanly. In the middle of chaos, celebrate the Word. Amidst Babel, speak the truth. Confront the noise and verbiage and falsehood of death with the truth and potency and efficacy of the Word of God. Know the Word, teach the Word, nurture the Word, preach the Word, define the Word, incarnate the Word, do the Word, live the Word. And more than that, in the Word of God, expose death and all death's works and wiles, rebuke lies, cast out demons, exorcise, cleanse the possessed, raise those who are dead in mind and conscience.

Resurrection, then, is not about changing us into something we are not. The Resurrection did not change Jesus into something new. Rather, it affirmed Jesus for who he had always been.

Like Mary, Resurrection is the power to hear Jesus speak our names, to hear that divine voice that yearns from deep inside us come bursting out to the surface. Resurrection is the full affirmation of who we truly are.

When we experience Resurrection at work in our lives, it is more like a transition where we finally come to affirm who we are, who we have always been, and who we will always be. Resurrection frees us from the power Death rules over us.

Putting Resurrection Into Practice

To practice Resurrection, then, is to speak hope to the world.

I want to challenge us, here at Brookside, to begin thinking about what it means to be a Resurrection people. What does it mean to see Resurrection as more than just an idea or a belief.

What might it mean to be a community that practices Resurrection?

What would it look like to put our faith into action?

What would it look like to live free from the power of Death.

... to help others live free from the power of Death.

Like any practice, we will need to exercise it, learn some new skills, use some muscles we are not used to using.

I believe it will begin, as it did with Mary, by hearing the power of the Resurrection whisper our name. Then we will be freed to speak words of hope, love, and affirmation to others.

Where do we see the power of Death at work in our world?

In the homeless shelters where individuals and families feel lost and alone in the world
—let us go and whisper to them words of hope,
let us speak their names,
let us practice Resurrection.

In the lives of transgender youth who live in a world that rejects them and leaves them alone
—let us go and whisper words of love and affirmation.
Let us affirm the beauty of who they are.
Let us speak their names.
Let us practice Resurrection.

In the lives of communities of color, immigrants, refugees, and Muslims where the phrases like the “rule of law” and “security” sound like dog-whistles echoing out “We’re coming for you...”
—let us go and whisper words of welcome and solidarity.
Let us proclaim life in the face of the power and fear of Death.
Let us speak their names.
Let us practice Resurrection.

The Light of Hope

When Resurrection speaks our name, the world becomes different and new because we see ourselves in the light of who we truly are. Then, we begin to speak and act in ways that helps the world see who they truly are—the power of the Resurrection begins to speak through us and whisper their names.

Sadly, many Christians have been brought up in communities that might preach about the Resurrection, but have no idea how to practice it. Contrary to the power of the Resurrection, they use religion as a form of domination through the pressure of orthodox doctrine, sacred text, and institutional authority. All of this is used in their communities to reshape their souls so they it will conform to a shape dictated by some theology. The basic idea here is that we are born with souls deformed by sin, and we are all hopeless until the authorities can come and re-shape us properly. That kind of theology only twists people in knots like pretzels—it doesn’t set people free.

This is not the kind of Resurrection power we see at work in the Gospel. All of this is turned upside down by an intimate relationship where Jesus whispers the disciples name and changes the course of human history!

In the Gospel Jesus proclaimed, we do not find people who were born unacceptable to God and need to be made acceptable by adhering to a set of doctrines. What we find in the Gospel is the overflowing of the belovedness of God. In the beginning, God created the world and called it good. As time goes on, the power of Death works to deform us, from within as well as without. We get twisted into shape—like pretzels—and we become something entirely at odds with the sacredness of the soul within us. But our soul never loses its original form. It never stops longing for us to live into our birth right integrity.

But then, in communities of trust, where the power of the Resurrection begins to call our name, there is a light of hope that begins to shine and we discover who we truly are.

Self-hatred turns to self-love. A hatred of others becomes a deep and abiding love that longs for wholeness and reconciliation. Violence, cruelty, brutality all get replaced with healing, kindness, surrender, and peace.

It is Sunday, the first day of the week, the sun has risen
—and yet, for too many it is still a world of darkness.

They are trapped in despair, unable to see how things can ever be different.

They may feel despised or rejected. Unwelcome. No where to go, no place to belong, no people to belong to.

This Sunday, perhaps every Sunday, there will be those who come here to Brookside like Mary, asking strangers where to find Jesus.

My prayer is that the folks here at Brookside will have learned to practice Resurrection enough, that there...
in the midst of darkness...
someone will whisper their name...

And their world will be changed forever!
—Amen