

Luke 24:1-12 (Easter Sunday)

I begin this Easter Sermon with a quote from Ron Rolheiser which Trudy Reese used to open our last Caring and Visitation meeting

What the resurrection of Jesus promises is that things can always be new again. It's never too late to start over. Nothing is irrevocable. No betrayal is final. No sin is unforgivable. Every form of death can be overcome. There isn't any loss that can't be redeemed...

In the resurrection we are assured that there are no doors that are eternally closed, every time we close a door or one is closed on us, God opens another for us. The resurrection assures us that God never gives up on us, even if we give up on ourselves.... In a scheme of things where Jesus breathes out forgiveness on those who betray him and God raises dead bodies from [tombs], we can begin to believe that in the end all will be well and every manner of being will be well and everything, including our own lives, will eventually [be well]...

The challenge of living this out is not just that of believing that Jesus rose physically from the grave, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, to believe that – no matter our age, mistakes, betrayals, wounds, and deaths – we can begin each day afresh... No matter what we've done, our future is forever pregnant with wonderful new possibility. Resurrection is not just a question of one day, after death, rising from the dead, but it is also about daily rising from the many mini-graves within which we so often find ourselves... As John Shea once so aptly put it: What the resurrection teaches us is not how to live – but how to live again, and again, and again!<sup>1</sup>

This Rolheiser quote reflects an important aspect of our scripture from Luke's gospel. The resurrection of Jesus has the power to shift our lives and perspective for the better. And this miracle doesn't happen on account of our piety, our faith, or our acts of charity. It happens because God makes it happen. Resurrection is God's doing independent from human efforts. Let me explain.

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other women had gone to the tomb. They are expecting to offer healing herbs and sweet smelling spices to a dead man. It is noteworthy that they mustered the courage to go to the tomb, but they are not expecting resurrection. They are perplexed by the stone sealing the tomb's entrance having been rolled away and an empty grave. The women are terrified by messengers in dazzling white. Still, though, at the behest of the messengers they remember, and are convinced of the message offered. As Stephanie noted two weeks back, these women become the apostles to the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ronrolheiser.com/daily-resurrection/#.YIRO2sjMKUk>

apostles.<sup>2</sup> The disciples, on the other hand, do not remember and dismiss the testimony of the women as an idle tale. And then we have a textual discrepancy regarding Peter's trip to the tomb.

The NRVS and most English translations (The RSV and Revised English Bible being the exceptions) include verse 12 about Peter making a personal pilgrimage to the tomb. The committee who studies such variations in the ancient texts cast great doubt that Peter made the trip giving the prospects a grade of "D".<sup>3</sup> "D" is not good on most report cards or in questions of disputed sections of the New Testament. Leaving out Peter's trip, as the committee deemed most authentic, underscores the utter lack of understanding on the part of all those male disciples. Their lack of trust in eye witnesses to the resurrection intensifies the complete insufficiency of their discipleship internship. In spite of this, Jesus continues to seek them out and draw them to new life. The Emmaus Road account and eating fish on the beach with the disciples follow today's text. They highlight the manner in which betrayal, disbelief, misunderstanding, and fear are transformed by the resurrection. Through the resurrected Christ, God patiently guides disciples to deeper life. God does this.

A few words on resurrection from Sacredise, which is a community committed to producing liturgy for progressive congregations:

"After the last two years, are you feeling like you need a resurrection?

What would it look like for you to experience a resurrection now?... I know that so many of us feel that the pandemic has robbed us of life. It has been more than a 'little death'—it's been pretty huge, even if we're not actually in the grave. But now, as we prepare to enter another Easter Season, the opportunity for resurrection awaits.

What would it mean for [us] to open [ourselves] to a new sense of creativity, hope, expectation, energy, and vibrancy?... I want to suggest that receiving resurrection begins with *being willing to let go of the life we have known* (to adapt the words of Joseph Campbell)...In times of chaos, we need to be willing to let go of our old assumptions and become open to a whole new way of being. Remember, resurrection always comes after a death, and sometimes that means the death of our old lives.

There's a transformation required in resurrection. Jesus was not the same after his resurrection as he was before his death. And that's why the first step in

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2011 printing), p. 311.

<sup>3</sup> *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, edited by Bruce M. Metzger (Federal Republic of Germany: United Bible Societies, 1971), xxvi of introduction and p. 184.

preparing for resurrection is getting comfortable with change, transformation, and releasing what we have known.<sup>4</sup>

I appreciate the sentiments of both quotes I have offered. Both quotes do, however, remain largely in the personal realm. What does resurrection mean in places like Ukraine, the occupied West Bank, Yemen, South Sudan, the reservations of Turtle Island, and so forth?. The men's group, the women's Bible and other sub sets of our congregation have spent time talking about Ukraine and the problem of Putin. If Putin, somehow, could be removed would the woes of the world cease? I really don't think so. Before Putin we have a long list of brutal tyrants and not just in Russia—the problem our world faces is much larger than Putin. There is no need to enumerate the horrors of Pinochet, Hitler, or the Khmer Rouge. The regional crucifixions which continue to plague our world are as much a theological problem as a political problem; more so, I would contend.

A book by N.T. Wright on my shelf has a chapter in it comparing varying philosophies in which people place their trust. Most people place their hope in some larger narrative to give their lives meaning, but these other stories have not measured up to the narrative known as “Resurrection”. Ideological Faith (Marxism or Capitalism or Feudalism) has left a wake of economic devastation for many and our environment. Nationalistic Faith has birthed world wars, the current mess in Ukraine and many other geo-political conflicts. Evolutionary Faith, a superiority of race or clan, has led to things like residential schools, apartheid, pogroms, the Jewish solution, patriarchy, slavery, the conflict in Rwanda, etc..., Platonic Faith (I'm just passing through) has led to an ambivalence to poverty, international conflict, and other social ills. The resurrection accounts which the gospels proclaim provide a different source of hope than all of these.<sup>5</sup>

Resurrection is God's tactic in seeking the non-violent healing of people and nations. We trust that walking in the way of Jesus, the lives of people and nations will be restored. We are a church tradition rooted in the non-violent atonement of Jesus, to use a Denny Weaver book title. The gift we have been given is needed as much now as ever in our world. It is, in fact, the trajectory of Luke-Acts. The work of God in Jesus described throughout Luke goes international in Acts. Luke-Acts tells a story in which Resurrection is both personal and international.

Living this story is not an easy road, as those women of Luke 24 learned—people may not accept eye-witness testimony. The working out of God's purposes will take time, as the men and women apostles of Acts learned—suffering may happen. And yet this is our story. The Good News is that Christ has gone before

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<sup>4</sup> John email from *Sacredise: Liturgical Resources for Progressive Communities* on March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022; *Sacredise's* web site is <https://sacredise.com/>.

<sup>5</sup> N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2008), pp 79-91.

us, is with us, and awaits us. On that note I want to leave this Easter sermon with the story of Archbishop Janani Luwum of Uganda from the 1970s.

In the 1970s, after seizing power from an elected government, Idi Amin introduced a reign of terror, dispatching critics and potential enemies with astonishing cruelty. Estimates of the number of his victims range conservatively in the tens of thousands. Amin was famous for his paranoid wrath, and there were few who dared to provoke him.

Janani Luwum was the Anglican primate of Uganda. He was, by all accounts, a fairly traditional prelate, not by temperament suited to the role of prophet. He had drawn criticism from some members of his church for his efforts to maintain friendly relations with the dictator. Biting his tongue, the archbishop would frequently say, “We are with you, your Excellency, with all that you do that is good.” As Luwum saw it, his job was to steer clear of “politics” and look after the welfare of his church.

By 1977 Luwum could no longer pretend that such a neutral course was possible. Amin himself would not permit it. He began to circulate rumors that the bishops were plotting violence against him. Luwum responded in angry denial and with a demand for proof. In early February, government troops surrounded his residence and searched for “incriminating evidence,” while holding the archbishop himself at gunpoint...On February 16 the Anglican bishops and other religious leaders were summoned to the presidential palace where Amin unveiled a cache of weapons, supposedly confiscated from the archbishop and his confederates. The charges were clearly absurd, but there was no doubting the likely consequences of this charade. Eventually the bishops were dismissed, all except Luwum. He was told that the president wanted to speak to him personally...Luwum was shot by Amin himself, after he had refused to sign a confession. [R]ealizing that his hour was at hand, Luwum had proceeded to pray.

Before the release of the body and in defiance of government orders, a funeral service for the archbishop was conducted in his cathedral. Standing over an empty grave, Luwum’s predecessor Archbishop Eric Sabiti repeated the message of the angels on Easter Sunday: “He is not here...He is risen.”<sup>6</sup>

People lead troubled lives and tyrants come and go. Through it all God’s ministry of resurrection continues. Thanks be to God and the risen Christ for this. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Ellsberg, *ibid*, pp. 79-80.