



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church

Asheville, North Carolina

April 1st, 2018

Easter Sunday

Sermon: "Resurrection Quest"

Rev. Marcia Mount Shoop, Rev. Richard Coble & Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block

Isaiah 25:6-9

John 20: 1-18

Marcia: This beautiful Easter morning, we have so much to be thankful for. I, for one, am immensely grateful to have such loyal and able colleagues. While working on our three part Easter sermon about resurrection has not been easy, it has been a joy to feel the support of my fellow pastors. There's one thing I can say for certain, we have each other's back, we never leave a person behind. (*Richard and Samantha are walking out*). Richard and Samantha, where in the world do you think you're going? It's game time! Remember... "leave no person behind", "we've got each other's backs?"

Samantha: Ooo...we are so sorry Marcia. We have total confidence in you.

Richard: Yeah, we have your back - way back in the narthex. YOU got this!

Marcia: No, WE'VE got this! This is supposed to be a dialogue sermon, Samantha and Richard. The congregation needs to hear the good news that we all have to share.

Richard: (*to Marcia*): I know I said that I would do this, but you remember how nervous I got when we started to talk about Easter morning.

Marcia: Yes, I remember you were sweating a bit more than usual on Wednesday in our sermon preparation.

Richard: It's just, I'm worried I won't get it right. I'm worried I won't say the right things.

Samantha: You are not the only one, Richard. I feel like people expect Christians to be able to say all the "right things" - especially when it comes to the resurrection.

Marcia: Remember what I told you all: you can't get up on Easter morning and just tell people what they want to hear. That's not the GCPC way.

Richard: Talk about pressure! How can we be authentic and say the right things at the same time?

Marcia: Maybe we aren't about saying the right things. Don't worry so much about being right...worry about being real.

Richard: Ok, here goes.

RICHARD'S SECTION:

In my early years, the resurrection was policed. It was made to fit neatly in a box: 'You may have the resurrection, but only in this way: The resurrection of the body. A man named Jesus went to his death to save you from your sins. You were guilty, but he paid your price, and then three days later, he got right back up again.' I remember quite vividly the youth minister of my adolescence saying, 'If Jesus was not raised from the dead, then it's nothing. Christianity is nothing; it's a lie. If it wasn't bodily resurrection, if it didn't happen in this way, then all of it, it's all nothing.' The evangelical leaders of my college years, the North Carolina Baptist State Convention that trained me to be a director of youth ministries in my college years, they also policed the resurrection: 'It was this way and no other way.' Have you ever felt boxed in like that?

So by the time I went to seminary, once I took my ordination exams, once I wrote out my statement of faith for my Committee, when I was asked in various ways, over and over again, do you believe in the resurrection: I responded from a place of fear, because I didn't hear in the question an invitation to know and experience the risen Jesus. I didn't hear an invitation to respond in joy ("I have seen the Lord, Mary said) but rather, in the question I heard a command: "You better say what you've been told to say: because the resurrection has to be one way, and no other way; otherwise, it's all a lie. Otherwise, you don't belong."

Which is absurd when you think of it, how tightly we try to tie the resurrection up in a yes or no question: "Did Christ rise in body or not? And you better not say 'no'," because the gospel accounts of the resurrection are, if anything, messy, untidy; they are about experiences of the resurrected Jesus that are all over the place: In John, you've got one disciple who believes without understanding, another who sees an empty tomb and the text is silent on his belief, yet a third, Mary, who mistakes the risen Lord for the gardener until he calls her by name, and as soon as she sees him, he distances himself from her: 'Do not hold on to me.' And that's not even getting to the string of contradictions one finds looking at the gospel stories all together; again they are all over the place, it's not tidy; why would we ever expect experiences of resurrection to be simple, to fit our expectations?

"Do not hold on to me." Strange how we try to hold on to Jesus now, to collapse him, shrink him down so he fits neatly into our boxes, into our systems, into yes and no interrogations: "What do you believe about the resurrection? Was it bodily or not? And you had better not say no."

I come to the question at a crossroads, flooded with anxiety. Because my 'yes' to that question once felt forced upon me by men still fighting theological wars about the resurrection that date back 200 years or more, by men whose power or certainty depended on a Jesus who could answer yes or no questions in all the right ways. Frankly, the Jesus of that interrogation frightens me. Frankly, I'm starting to resent the question.

Because at one point that conformity made me all but want to leave the church, to seek more fertile, more life giving-ground. But in the midst of deadening pressures, over and over again, I nonetheless experienced the resurrection, I found places of welcome, Jesus followers of open thought, of passion for something beyond their own certainty, for something beyond their own power. I found congregations of curiosity, and wonder, and joy, and awe, places of amazement,

people who experienced the resurrected Christ without trying to collapse him into a yes or no. Over and again, I witnessed a type of wonder that sought to follow the resurrected Christ, especially when he defied the pages of the most well-constructed creed or theology. I, we, have found such places, or rather, we have been lead to them, by the Spirit of the resurrected one.

The resurrection is not a weapon to separate us; it is not a litmus test for the powerful or for those convinced of their own correctness. If Resurrection is anything, it is an experience of new life, one that calls each us of by name, and leads us into the unknown.

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Marcia: Amen, Richard! I hear Good News in your words--I really resonate with places of wonder and amazement.

Samantha: I also appreciated that you went inward and you spoke about your authentic belief - that inspires me, and I believe all of us, to be honest about our own journeys with resurrection.

Richard: So, you're saying I survived my first Easter sermon?!?

Marcia and Samantha: (*laughing*) We'll see.

Richard: So, Samantha, let's go back for just a second to that part where you said that I inspire you. That really resonated with me--so, I want to hear more--tell us more about your resurrection quest!

Marcia: Tell us about when the resurrection came alive for you.

SAMANTHA'S SECTION:

I remember standing over her casket weeping. I was 8 years old and this was the first time I had ever seen a lifeless body. Grandma Luci (who we called Tata) seemed to be peaceful lying there. One of my aunts from Puerto Rico leaned over my shoulder and said, "Don't worry Samantita, you'll see her again soon."

Now my aunt wasn't referring to the afterlife, for many of my family members from that side of the family, there is the expectation that loved ones gone will in fact appear again in dreams or in visions - maybe to offer you comfort or advice, or to give you a stern talking to, or to challenge you to be more courageous – less afraid.

I stepped away from the casket and rested my head on my Grandma Eloise's shoulder (she's my atheist Jewish grandmother from the other side of the family). I asked her, "Where do we go when we die?"

"Oh" she said, "What a great question. We go into the ground." For this grandma, death was not something to fear – it was simply another step on the road – another adventure or challenge to face. "But you know," she said. "When you die you are not really dead."

“Huh?” I asked now utterly confused.

“You see in Judaism there are two deaths. The first is when your body dies and the second is the last time anyone ever mentions your name. That’s why we must keep speaking about loved ones who’ve passed away. When we do, we lift them up and they are present with us now.”

Growing up in my interfaith, multicultural home, resurrection was certainly a holy mystery - one open for questions, suggestions and sacred imagining. I received a mixture of messages, interpretations, and stories - all which informed and complicated my budding faith.

Why did we live in a world so cruel that God had to lay down God’s life for our sake?
And what did it mean to believe and trust that God in bodily form did in fact rise from the dead on Easter morning?

“Why are you weeping,” Jesus asks. For my Presbyterian Puerto Rican *tias* and *tios*, the notion of resurrection – of a body dead, now lifted up - was as real as the curls on my head. There is no need to weep...for no matter the hardships we face, no matter how brutal the world beats down on our backs - the good news is that bodies dead rise again, thrive again, speak again, live on – all thanks to the love and mercy of Jesus Christ.

“Why are you weeping,” Jesus asks. For my Ashkenazi Jewish family, the idea of resurrection came to life in the ways we choose to follow God, in the ways we honor our ancestors, our names, our collective calling here and now. There is no need to weep...because we are a people who know what it is like to rise from the ashes. We are a people chosen for *tukun olam* – for healing our broken world, lifting up battered bodies, resurrecting hope where there was once only pain.

My family in its fullness gave me a love for resurrection – for the bodily, spiritual, metaphorical, real, living-breathing, ‘then and now’ resurrection - and the transformation that it brings.

Christ’s body was born to rise.
Our bodies are born to rise.
Our neighbors’ bodies are born to rise.

Resurrection dries our tears, turns our world’s upside down, challenges what is logical, breaks down fear, empowers courage, and ignites new life in the midst of chaos.

The good news of Easter morning - for me - is that we are a resurrection people chosen to rise up and resurrect the world.

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Richard: I love how resurrection can mean two different things to two different sides of your family, but you can hold them together in your own faith.

Marcia: Yes, I love the mystery and richness of that unresolved but hopeful way of being alive. That's Good News!

Samantha: That felt good. Richard, I am glad we stayed. So, what about you, Marcia...who taught you about the resurrection?

Richard: And was it life-giving for you?

MARCIA'S SECTION:

I come from a tribe of thinking ones—stoic Scots and hard worn Irish.

I come from a tribe of protest—French Huguenots, English reformers.

I come from pioneers, from women who played expected roles and stepped across lines. I come from Sarah Truly who brought her children down the Mississippi River on a raft, husbandless, but with an enslaved person on her journey to a new life in Natchez.

I come from Virginia Lander, who had more smarts than she was allowed to use, who poured everything she had into being a minister's wife who had a college degree.

I come from generations of pastors and professionals, socially conscious intellectuals. Rule-followers and high-achievers.

My resurrection quest began as no quest at all. It began as a moderated intellectual question—how to make something as cognitively ridiculous as a dead body dancing out of his grave, something enlightened and theologically educated people could discuss with a straight face and a clear conscience.

In fact, this question about the bodily resurrection was really not the most burning one of theological questions. I was much more comfortable with queries of biblical interpretation and the ethics of Christian life. These questions made the bodily resurrection seem unimportant—I could be a Christian without settling that issue with myself. I could be a Christian and remain a stranger to what the bodily resurrection is all about.

That's what I told myself. That's what my heritage told me—the thinking ones, the Stoic ones, the reformers, the pioneers, the pastors and professionals and intellectuals.

But none of them warned me about the pain, the weight of it, the loneliness of a life that does not taste and see resurrection for itself. And so I was unprepared for that grave—that place of isolation, that underneath.

But going there was where I needed to go I guess. I had to learn to see in the dark—to make out Jesus' silhouette in the shadows.

That's when it happened for me—the regeneration of the parts of me that had gone underground, that I had worked so hard to hide—the feeling of coming back to life, the feeling of nerve

endings reawakening, the capacity to be present in life, the capacity to not fly away from the pain, but to believe the Christ inhabits our suffering with healing opportunity.

Healing unfolded itself into my broken body coming home to itself—sanctified by love, consecrated by compassion, made well by faith—and by a savior who is right here, he was right there.

In places where I thought there was only death for me—where brokenness had become who I was because of trauma, because of secret shame, because the church took Jesus away—where have you taken my Lord?

Then he would show up—I could feel him there—gently inviting me in a healing direction. He taught me how to trust mystery. He taught me how to be open. He taught me how to have the courage to be vulnerable again. And he brought me back to church as my whole self.

There are moments I remember. When I felt the flutter of feeling connected to life again—when the colors of leaves and the sky shimmered where they had been dull, when I could notice the difference between me standing outside my body and me being fully present to my body.

I see all of you differently because of resurrection—I see your beauty not in spite of your brokenness, I see your beauty because of your brokenness, because of the way Christ’s love intricately crafts mosaics of redemption from our scars, from the fragments of our lives, from the pieces that don’t fit back together neatly, from the jagged edges. What a tenderness God extends to us through Jesus—And I never realized how powerful tenderness could be.

Resurrection is in our bones, in our muscle twitches, in the energy that we share with each other without saying a word, in the deep narratives of broken hearts able to love again. Resurrection is built into the way our bodies are made, that way communities are made—in the ecosystems of God’s good creation, death does not have the last word.

I’m living, breathing proof. And I want you to know—I have seen the Lord!

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Richard: I have seen the Lord!

Samantha: I have seen the Lord!

Marcia: He is Risen!

Richard & Samantha: He is Risen indeed!