



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church

Asheville, North Carolina

April 8th, 2018

Presbyterian Women Sunday

Sermon: "Resurrection Tales"

Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block, Mary Lou Nash, Keaton Hill & Elizabeth Propst

Acts 4:32-35

John 20: 19-31

Samantha: What a story! This text reminds me that Jesus loves making an entrance!

Keaton: I think it's safe to say that the disciples were not expecting to see him.

Elizabeth: And when he did appear, it was hard for some to believe that it was really him. Poor, Thomas!

Mary Lou: But what were they expecting? God is mysterious! And when you are best friends with Jesus, you should expect him to do some mysterious things.

Samantha: You said it, sisters! You know, we hear this story nearly every year: the risen Lord appears to his frightened disciples. And yet, it is still so easy for us to feel distant from it, to tuck it away like an old fairy tale (something our mothers used to tell us at bedtime). It can be hard to *really* bring the fullness of this mind-bending moment into our modern world: to experience it for ourselves and claim it as our story today.

Our Gospel is filled with Jesus encounters - moments where Christ shows up and changes everything. His interactions with women before and after his death are particularly eye-opening. In the temple. At the well. In the living room. Beside the empty tomb. Again and again, women serve as powerful witnesses to God's infinite glory - and they teach us to shout with joy and faith, "He is Risen!"

Last week we spoke about what resurrection means for us as Christians, but on this second Sunday of Easter, I wonder if we can consider together where resurrection shows up for us now.

How can we recognize resurrection moments in our own lives? Times when we have seen glimpses of the risen Christ, ready to offer us peace in the midst of chaos, ready to reveal his punctured hands and side, ready to call us to believe in the impossible.

We can't do this alone. I invite us to let the voices of those women passed wash over, and to hear the voices of women today sink in. Mary Lou, Keaton and Elizabeth we need to hear what you have witnessed.

Where have you seen signs of resurrection in your own lives?

Where has Christ shown up in unexpected ways for you?

And how might we open ourselves up to a God who is standing before us?

~

Congregational Sung Response:

There is a longing in our hearts, O Lord for you to reveal yourself to us.

There is a longing in our hearts for love we only find in you our God

Mary Lou's Story:

Off the western coast of Scotland is a small holy island called Iona. One of its early inhabitants was an outcast from Ireland called Columba, later to be known as a saint. There is not much on this small rise of land in the North Sea but a few houses, ruins of a nunnery, some small places to shop and some to stay for a few nights, a magnificent and very old abbey, a small chapel and many, many sheep. To reach this holy space one really goes on a pilgrimage taking train, bus, two boats and much patience. I have traveled this journey four times and always found God waiting for me as I stepped off the ferry from Fienport to Iona, the final leg of the trip. You see, Iona is known as "a thin place", a place where one finds God is ever so present and accessible, a place, it is said, where heaven and earth almost touch.

As I walk into the abbey, knowing that for hundreds of years pilgrims before me have walked these stone floors, run their hands on the beautiful and massive green marble font and equally outsized green marble communion table I am embraced by a God of the ages who has heard the prayers of so many and blessed their words. In worship there, as the sacrament of Eucharist is celebrated, when the loaf is passed and the cup shared there is such a sense of Christ's presence in the midst of people from around the world coming together.

In the tiny chapel, a few yards from the abbey I join with a small group that is singing familiar hymns that reverberate from the stone walls and celebrate a holy presence. Walking outside I can look up at the towering carved high crosses that flank the entrance to the abbey imagining the love that went into creating the symbols of faith that embellish them; that tell stories of the Bible before most Christians were able to read. God's story is present everywhere in so many ways and here is a time and place where I can absorb the love and grace that is offered to me as a Child of the faith.

One day I walk across the pasture land among the sheep to St Columba's Bay where stones litter the shore. It is a tradition to choose two stones. After some consideration, I know that there are burdens that I want to leave behind from my life after having spent time in prayer and study on the island and I assign them to one of the chosen stones, and fling it into the sea. To the other stone, I entrust something I want to take home from my journey to this holy place and I tuck that stone into my pocket and take it back to the inn where I am staying and treasure it.

Sometimes in our busy lives we find it difficult to find moments to carve out space to linger in a holy presence. What joy it is when opportunities present themselves to sink into a place of renewal and resurrection; to wander where we know God has been speaking to God's people for so long and to rejoice that I have had opportunities to spend these times where I, too, can feel that holy presence, and to have these experiences to remember when the world closes in and God seems distant. When sadness, hurt, pain or discouragement, creep into my days, I can reach back to that island and wrap myself in the grace and love that filled my days when I felt the closeness of heaven and a holy presence in that thin place, on the island of Iona.

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Congregational Sung Response:

*There is a longing in our hearts, O Lord for you to reveal yourself to us.
There is a longing in our hearts for love we only find in you our God*

Elizabeth's Story:

I got my driver's license about a year ago. The first time I drove alone my hands were shaking the whole time; I was too jittery to play music because I was worried it would distract me. I was filled with this nervous excitement and giddiness that I had never felt before. I wasn't afraid of driving itself - I was more affected by what driving, as a rite of passage, represents.

My first time driving alone was, as it is for many American teenagers, a very concrete step towards adulthood. It's frightening to come of age in any time period, but to be a young adult in present-day America is, I think, particularly difficult. With the spread of toxic politics, the cries of revolutionary social movements, with the way technology and global trade constantly change the job market, young Americans are faced with a lot of uncertainty and anxiety about our futures. And so, after that morning last March when I realized that I would soon inherit that uncertainty, I began to carry with me a tight feeling of fear. Fear of the future, fear that I couldn't trust myself to succeed in the world on my own.

Late last August, faced with a lot of blank Word documents that needed to be filled with college essays, I woke up at 4 A.M. with a feeling pushing me to go out on my own. I filled a thermos with tea and drove out to the Blue Ridge Parkway, getting lost twice because of the darkness. I parked on a lookout high up on the Parkway and sat cross-legged on the hood of my car. There was enough light over the horizon to see the mountains spread out for miles, like a frozen ocean, with clouds nestled in the lower valleys.

As I looked out over the mountains, I felt the chill of the breeze on my face, my thermos warming my hands, the metal of my car underneath me. I heard the first chirping of birdsong. I didn't have any cell service; I was surrounded by miles of empty forest. If I was bitten by a snake, or sprained an ankle, or ran out of gas, I would be on my own. I think I was probably more *physically* alone than I'd ever been.

But any nervousness that I might've felt didn't appear. Because I realized that my solitude, the independence that I was so worried about, was what enabled me to fully appreciate the beauty of the morning and the mountains, without distractions. And in the same way, leaving behind childhood and stepping into the uncertainty of adulthood was what would enable me to cultivate a more meaningful understanding of God. I could feel for the first time that I would never truly be *alone* - that God is always with us and around us, and that God was with me then and would follow me wherever I went in the coming years. As I felt my solitude, I also felt calm, and grace, and lightness, because the little nagging feeling of fear finally dissolved.

It's easy to let change frighten us into looping back around the wrong way, to lash out against what is 'other' and new. But times of transition are opportunities for resurrection and rebirth. When God stands in front of us, when God offers us opportunities to trust in divine grace and

love, we might feel doubt reflexively, but we can choose not to let doubt influence our actions. I found renewal by taking my fears - independence, isolation, vulnerability - to their symbolic maximum. It was only there, by leaning into fear and into the unknown, that I could also fully lean into God.

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Congregational Sung Response:

*There is a longing in our hearts, O Lord for you to reveal yourself to us.
There is a longing in our hearts for love we only find in you our God.*

Keaton's Story:

Try as I might, I cannot keep the beat of resurrection on my own.
As soon as I start to think about it, analyze it -- I've lost the beat.
That's about when the Spirit gently reminds me to still my mind, and just. practice.
Just practice resurrection; move to its rhythm.
Resurrection has a haunting, holy tune, carrying the testimonies of Hagar, Miriam, Mary, Candace, Elvia, each of us.
Resurrection has a vibrant pulse, composing new life out of disparate chords.

And resurrection takes practice.
So, on Good Friday I took the courage and the body that God gave me, and I went to practice.
On that day, the rhythm of resurrection flowed as a pilgrimage. With Beloved Asheville, youth and elders, mentors, residents housed and unsheltered, religious and agnostic, I processed.
Resurrection practice is a mysterious movement, its rhythm echoing the sacred unity of death and life, sorrow and joy.
And like mystery, resurrection pilgrims often appear foolish, even ridiculous, to onlookers.

There is resurrection in mystery.

Do you remember that day -- Good Friday? It was a spectacular spring day after our long, long winter. With the perennials in bloom, we processed from Pritchard Park up Patton Ave. Past tourists sightseeing, we processed, past new plants sprouting from seed, we processed, up Patton Avenue to the Vance Memorial.
And in silent cadence we stopped to bear witness near the site where Buncombe County used to hold slave auctions.
Almost 700 human beings were sold into chattel slavery in the heart of this city.

As fellow pilgrims read the names of women, men, and children that our own James Patton bought and sold, we bore witness and we kept the resurrection beat. The beat of loss in love, the beat of sorrow in joy, the beat of death in life.

There is resurrection in bearing witness.

The rhythm carried us on to the Buncombe County Jail.

Standing, swaying at the base of this massive building, we looked up to see hands pressing between the slats on the windows.

The hands of those imprisoned for immigration violations,
the hands of those not convicted of a crime at all, but too poor to afford cash bail.

We saw the hands of those who are convicted of crimes, awaiting transfer to prison, and into the billion-dollar prison slave labor industry.

The clanging cymbals of empire, injustice, and greed threatened to drown out our resurrection hymn.

It is hard to move to the holy beat with oppression and violence and death shrieking all around. It is so hard that the Lord our God, Jesus Christ himself had to show us how.

There is resurrection in Christ.

In concert, we raised our own hands, as the words of Hebrews 13 were chanted: "Remember those in prison as though you were in prison with them, and those ill-treated as though you too felt their torment."

Resurrection reverberated through us and between us.

And the resurrection beat plays on.

In practicing, I find: There is resurrection in mystery.

There is resurrection in bearing witness.

There is resurrection in Christ.

And there is resurrection in us.

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Mary Lou: Keaton, thank you for your story. It reminds me that the mystery of resurrection calls us to action, to compassion and to change the status quo.

Keaton: Mary Lou, thank you. As you shared your reflection, I took comfort in remembering that we join with countless peoples across space and time, who yearn to linger in the holy presence.

Samantha: Elizabeth, I appreciate your words because they helped me to hold onto hope that Christ's peace abounds. Jesus is always there to calm our fears and awaken courage.

Elizabeth: Samantha, thanks for the opportunity to share and hear stories that remind us that resurrection is not a thing of the past - it's all around us.

Samantha: Hearing your stories reminds us that we are not unlike those disciples from years ago - locked in a room, fearful of the worst - but then amazed and transformed when Jesus unexpectedly shows up. How good it is to know that still today we can believe in a risen Christ who stands before us again and again. And who calls us to help one another experience God's life-giving peace, mercy and resurrection.

All: Thanks be to God.