3-27-16

Easter

“Love’s Vindication”

Scriptures:

Revelation 5:1-14

Psalm 148

John 19:38-20:18

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts bring you glory and praise, O God, our strength and our redeemer.

A few weeks ago I began reading that famous novel by Frederick Buechner entitle “Lion Country.” At one point, the narrator, Antonio, is attempting to recall the town of Armadillo in Florida, and what presides in his memory is a side walk that goes nowhere. Antonio says:

What I see in my mind most clearly as I try to remember is a certain stretch of sidewalk. The main shopping street comes to an end where some railroad tracks cut across it, but beyond the tracks the sidewalk continues a quarter of a mile or more along one side of a pot-holed macadam road that leads south toward Fort Lauderdale. It is a wide sidewalk made of marble slabs with crab-grass growing up between them and spider-webbing all over the place. […] The sidewalk eventually peters out somewhere in the scrubby grass. It doesn’t go anywhere. It doesn’t serve any purpose and never did because the town it was originally laid down to serve never got out that far. During the land boom in the twenties, apparently, there were dreams for Armadillo that never materialized, and the building lots that were to have been for millionaire villas and luxury hotels are nothing much now but palmettos and creepers and the kind of junk people throw out of car windows. When I think of Armadillo, it is this sidewalk I think [of] first – a native American ruin and not entirely without a kind of appeal as it rambles on into the scrub, going nowhere.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The sidewalk indelibly marks Antonio’s memory and imagination because it is a relic, a talisman of human intention and experience that imparts to the heart and mind the unavoidable realization that what seems to him a distant past is, in fact, not his past but someone else’s lingering present. Relics do not always tells us exactly what life was like in the shrouded mystery of the past, but they tell us that there was, indeed, life.

Our anthropologists ask questions of relics to feed our hunger for the answers we cannot avoid asking: who are we? why is the world the way it is? With all the ingenuity of science, we demand of relics that they tell us what their purpose was; we want to know about the life for which they were made; and we wonder whether the dreams of those ancient peoples were realized, or whether their dreams and stories are long forgotten, with nothing to show but broken bits of pottery and sidewalks that trail off into the undergrowth to end in some purposeless obscurity.

The ancient story of Jesus – told and retold over some two-thousand-odd-years – is a just such a relic and captures our imaginations. The story harbors the secrets of some lost civilization buried in the deeps of time, some lived experience that makes its way into our present. And like a sidewalk that disappears into vines and shrubs and grass, the exact words of the eye witnesses to the Resurrection of Jesus, disappear into the kudzu of 2000 years of human life – a tangle of incomprehensible and barely known triumph and tragedy.

And yet somehow this story comes at us, full tilt, through the ages; and we must reckon with it: how on the night in which Jesus was betrayed, he washed feet and infused bread and wine with his power and essence; how he was arrested by the Jews, handed over to the Romans and put to death; how he was wrapped up in a cloth and buried; and how he appeared to his friends and many others on the first day of the following week. This is the Oral Tradition of the followers of Jesus, which gives rise to the composition of the New Testament; these are the truths without which the Christian Faith disintegrates into gibberish; and this is the story that is impossible for our intellects to grasp, or our science to prove.

So what will ground our beliefs? What is that palpitation of the heart, that transcendence of the mind, and that centering of the soul which will allow us to put our whole trust in the grace of this revelation? What will give us the power to live lives of hope and love?

Specifically, Upon what grounds may we affirm that the Resurrection happened to Jesus? How is it that we can say that this thing is true, which by all modern evaluation in impossible? The short answer is that if we will take the risk of obeying the commandment of the Crucified-Resurrected Jesus – the commandment to give our lives for each other and the world – when we do *this* and see the fruit of that faith, our experience of love will convince us that Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead and is with us in every breath. When we see the new community that is forged from the rubble of our broken down walls, we will find the Resurrection to be true. When we feel ourselves being changed by the giving and receiving of love into those people who have power over the fear of death, we will find that the Resurrection is true.

You see, the truth of the good news about Jesus being raised from the dead cannot be fully explained; but it can be fully experienced. Indeed, what is true about the Resurrection will prove true in our lives. And what is true in our lives is that we are dying. In all the moments of time when Death is overcome – we must recognize that we are participating in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This brings us to another encouraging word: that while technology has changed in 2000 years, we haven't. In the grand scheme of things, 2000 years is a drop in the ocean of Time. Human triumph and tragedy haven't changed at all since the 33 years Jesus walked the hills of Palestine. Life is still triumph; Death is still tragedy. So if there is anything true about the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, it will prove true in our experiences of being alive, and in our experiences of dying.

The Resurrection is wholeness and courage in the midst of cancer.

The Resurrection is a feeling of presence after the passing of a loved one.

The Resurrection is the peace forged when the rich take responsibility for the poor.

The Resurrection is the endurance and humor of old folks who are confined to their homes or

rooms.

The Resurrection is how humans notice the beauty of Planet Earth, even in the midst of war and

famine and storm.

The Resurrection is the ingenuity and human genius of the Africans who survived American

Slavery.

The Resurrection is in every moment of human history when compassion triumphs over greed,

anger, lust, fear, incarceration, and injury.

The Resurrection is forgiveness – that forgiveness which takes the wrong-doer by the hand,

raising him to his feet, leads him out of his guilt, and invests him again with the work of

the beloved community.

For this is what the word means – Resurrection: to stand up again!

We have this story of the dead body laid prone in a new hewn grave coming again to the upright: the tense flexibility of the body reestablished and the human frame brought vertical by some transfusion of breath and blood and electricity... And this man, Jesus, who was bolted to a post, goes walking in the garden near the place where he was executed, turning the grave into the womb of his new and everlasting life. And in this standing-up-again of the one who was dead, God begins to reveal the culmination of the work that was begun when, from the impenetrable chaos and incomprehensibility of  Divine Life, God calls out: Let There Be Light!

Light is like the sidewalk in Buechner’s novel: it reveals God’s intention to create… but the light has been shadowed in the vines of Evil and Sin and Death. In the Resurrection that choked pathway – the way that is the truth which leads to life – that road back into Eden is cleared. And the first thing we come to understand when we stare down that thoroughfare of the New Jerusalem is that God is eternally faithful. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is One who makes promises. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the identity of the God revealed in him are inseparable, because without the Resurrection, God breaks all of God’s promises. For the followers of Jesus, either the Resurrection happened to him, or there is no God at all. Either the Resurrection is true, or there is no God at all. For if Death is the end, then the Creator who lovingly calls the universe into being is a fickle figment of our imaginations.

The key to this mystery is revealed in Gethsemane, when Jesus prayers for an alterative to facing the murderous economy and politics of the Roman Empire. But what Jesus already knows is that to be the Begotten Son of the God who says “Let the Creation have life!”…. means to face, judge, and condemn the powers and principalities who participate in the death of creation: those who would sequester flourishing life as the luxury of a few. Indeed, the Cross is the unavoidable outcome of the birth at Bethlehem, ***which means that Resurrection is the ultimate purpose of the birth at Bethlehem*** – for God will eternally continue to be faithful to the promise of life.

This promise of life is what Jesus clings to in Gethsemane. He will not worship his fear; he will not worship his power to avoid the cross or destroy those who would be his enemies. Rather, he continues to worship the One he knows and loves as “Father.” Even though it costs him a brutal execution, he will not break the first commandment – “Hear, O Israel: the Lord your God, the Lord is One. You shall have no other gods before me.” His love for Abba is stronger than his fear; and his trust in the love *of* Abba is deeper – far deeper – that his doubt. You see, belief and love are the same word: to believe God and trust God is to love God. Indeed, our word “belief” traces the roots of its meaning in the Germanic word *geliebte*, which means “belovèd.” So we must understand that Jesus doesn’t face the Cross in the courage of his convictions – his intellectual acceptance of the claims of Hebrew Scripture. No. Jesus faces the Cross on the basis of the experience of loving and being loved by the Creator. It is love that proves the Resurrection: God the parent and God the Spirit refuse to be parted from God the Child; and the Triune God refuses to be without us too.

Some of you may find it hard to believe. But do you find it hard to love? If, in fact, there is a God who called the Creation into being – that is, if the universe is not a random soup of particles, gravity, and light – then that same God can reanimate the dead body of Jesus and establish the New Creation in him. The question of the Resurrection is the question of God; and we must understand coming to a point of belief in the Resurrection as the very same thing as falling in love with the Divine Being who has chosen us for life.

This is our story; and what makes it true is not that it can be proved. No. What makes this story true is that Love is still being vindicated. It is love that is and will continue to change the world – not rhetoric, not science, not money, not military might – none of these things will give life. But love will overcome the death of the world. Love will make gardens out of prisons; love will set a table for the hungry; love will find shelter for those who have no home; love will give water to the thirsty; love will come alongside the lonely; love will weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice – Love will overcome the crucifying World.

If you will walk down this shadowy, winding, ancient way – a path made by hands that no one remembers, that curves around a bend and is lost to sight in the tangled vines of the World’s hate and greed – if you will begin to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, you will be asked to give your life for the life of the World; you will also find that your love will be vindicated, you will claim Life from the grip of Sin.

You will discover the things that make for peace.

You will experience the truth that Death is no more.

You will meet a person in your heart of hearts whose name is Jesus,

and you will receive his love and everlasting life.

1. Buechner, Frederick. *The Book of Bebb* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1990) pgs. 30-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)