

Practice Resurrection

APRIL 2, 2017; 5TH SUNDAY IN LENT
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As we come to today's gospel lesson from John, it's important to the story to know three things:

1. Jesus has been on the road performing miracles. After the miracle of healing the blind man, Jesus escapes a second stoning attempt on his own life and flees to the Jordan, the place where John baptized.
2. In this place, Jesus receives this message from the sisters who live in Bethany, Martha and Mary. They say, "Lord, the one whom you love is ill." Jesus stays put for two days before he does anything.
3. As Jesus goes to Bethany, Martha meets him and then calls her sister, Mary, to come and to see Jesus.

Today's gospel lesson begins where Mary encounters Jesus. Listen now to a Word from the Lord, from the gospel of John, the eleventh chapter, verses 32-44.

JOHN 11:32-44

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, Come and See." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

This is the Word of the Lord. **THANKS BE TO GOD.**

In our neighborhood, there is a house with a small banner that hangs between two porch columns. The banner is crafted with a series of burlap triangles, each with a letter, or symbol, strung together side by side on a cord. Earlier in the week, I glanced at it quickly as we walked by and said curiously, “Ho – Pet.”

My family looked at me with that “there she goes being goofy look” as we momentarily stopped on the sidewalk and then came their clarifying words of instruction. “Look again, Anne, It spells Hope. And then there is the symbol of a cross.” To be fair, H – O- P – E- were all upper case letters and the cross, looked like a lowercase t. But still, I needed help to see hope and the cross.

The Lenten message of that neighborhood banner settled. Hope spelled out that leads to the cross. It’s where we are in the church. The 40 days of Lent are drawing to a close as Christ approaches the cross. A Lenten question to ask might be, “How do we find hope before the cross?”

In the gospel of John, the life that Jesus offers is not only about a hope for the future, about what happens after we die. Life in Christ is also about finding hope in ordinary and everyday events. We create a way for hope when we are genuine and vulnerable, curious and kind. We know hope most when we discern the loving presence of God with one another.

Jesus models this sort of hope when he encounters and makes time for the least of these, the sick and the hungry, the lost and the lonely. With the most unlikely of signs, he equips love beyond belief that spreads to the farthest reaches. He reminds his followers, “The thief comes to take away hope, but I come that you may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Time and time again, I have seen members of this congregation model this sort of life. Whether it is sitting with one who is 101 and listening to answers to the self-imposed question of “Why am I still here?” or another member being present, simply showing up, to one lost in grief. These are signs that point to hope.

In the gospel of John, Jesus begins his signs at a wedding, turning water into wine and he keeps going. With each sign, he intensifies his identity as God’s Son with profound I AM statements. With today’s story he claims, “I am the Resurrection and the Life.”

Sometimes these signs don’t compute. The poet, Wendel Berry, calls these moments of practicing resurrection. Jesus uses ordinary elements to provide profound hope. The hungry are fed with five barley loaves and two fish. A blind man regains sight with dirt and spit.

For those who follow Jesus, these signs defy worldly power and critique blind acceptance of the status quo. They do not leave an easy silence in their wake. Jesus brings a new regime and at every turn he increases pressure on the status quo, attacking norms, and the vested interests of the day. And candidly, if we are not threatening our own comfortable norms at every turn, if we

are not making time for the least of these, if we are not practicing resurrection (as the poet calls it) well, then maybe we are not offering hope to those whom Jesus would most have us to serve.

Jesus took those loaves offered by a child, gave thanks to God, and fed thousands. Jesus disregarded the Sabbath, trusted in his God given gifts, and brought sight to a man born blind. Jesus brought hope to a people with an almost unbelievable form of love for all, especially the other. Hope looks like love when you least expect it. For Jesus, the risk of loving is always worth taking.

After Jesus healed the blind man, the crowd picked up stones and attempted to harm him and it wasn't the first attempt on his life. Jesus' radical love leads him to his own grave. For Jesus, life was not separated from suffering and pain.

He escapes to the Jordan and I imagine Jesus sitting at the water's edge, casting pebbles into the water, watching ripples circle outward. They say grief ripples out like that. I wonder if he went back to the water's edge to remember and to be encouraged. To hear God's thundering echo, "This is my Beloved. Listen to him."

Life for Martha and Mary was not separated from suffering and pain. When trouble nears, as sisters of rebellion, they do not cower or fade away, they go to God. They both address Jesus as Lord. "Lord, we need you." "Lord, we need your love and your hope." "Lord, we need you now." It is likely they were dependent upon their brother, Lazarus, for their livelihood. So when he becomes ill, they get a message to Jesus at the Jordan, to which he takes two days to respond. Hope can take time.

In his book *Can You Drink the Cup*, Henri Nouwen wrote,

"Every time we make the decision to love someone, we open ourselves to great suffering, because those we most love cause us not only great joy but also great pain. The greatest pain comes from leaving. When the child leaves home, when the husband or wife leaves ... when the beloved friend dies ... the pain of the leaving can tear us apart. Still, if we want to avoid the suffering of leaving, we will never experience the joy of loving. And love is stronger than fear, life stronger than death, hope stronger than despair. We have to trust that the risk of loving is always worth taking."

Jesus loved Lazarus, Martha and Mary. The risk of this love leads him to his death. The immediate way to the cross begins with Love giving life.

A few years ago, I was sitting in the balcony of Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta at the Festival of Homiletics. Barbara Lundblad completed her lecture and was receiving a standing ovation.

He moved away from the podium, hesitated for a brief moment and then returned to the microphone. As the crowd settled, she asked one question. "Have you ever wondered why we begin our words of institution at the Lord's Table with remembering Christ's betrayal instead of anointing?" "On the night that he was betrayed ..."

I pulled out the Bible from the pew rack at Peachtree and turned to the gospel of John. What might it mean to shift from a perspective of betrayal to one of anointing at the Table? "During the week that he was anointed by a woman, and on the night that he was betrayed by a dear friend, ..."

Reading in the gospel of John that day I realized, it is Mary, one who meets Jesus on the road and says, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." Who anoints Jesus. It is Mary, who sees Jesus greatly disturbed and deeply moved. It is Mary, who sees our Lord weep, who anoints Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair.

It is Mary, who chooses hope in the face of the cross.

When we come to the table we bear witness to Love, and point to hope. The possibility for hope is made real when we say to one another, "This is Christ's body, broken for you." The possibility for hope is made real when we say, "This is the cup of the new covenant, shed for you."

Coming to and leaving from the table we are anointed in God's good love and positioned to bear hope, especially in the face of the cross. The language of our liturgy, prayers and invitations into the mystery of God straighten out our way, bind us together, and compel us to service.

Yes, as Hemingway said, "The world breaks everyone and then some become strong at the broken places." As grief ripples out, sometimes hope is hard to see and we need a little help. Love helps us to see hope. I wonder, where have you discerned the loving presence of God? How will you be a hope bearer? How will we bear hope?

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