

A Covenant of Compassion

March 23, 2008
Edwards (Knox) United Church
Easter Sunday

Jeremiah 31:1-6a

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

Matthew 28:1-10

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

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The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

Visiting cemeteries is always a mixed experience, with mixed emotions. We come to honor, to speak to the dead, to deal with unfinished business, to let go. Yet in reality what we get is silence. The tomb of silence stands guard. Mary and Martha come to the tombs. They come to honor a friend. Like all of us who visit graveyards, they are reflecting upon the meaning of their encounter with their past. Mary and Martha come to study, to defy forgetfulness. The issue for them, and for us, is whether we will be a victim of the past or whether the past will send us into a hopeful future. A question of whether we define the past or it defines us.

Thursday I was talking to a friend who is also from the prairies. We talked about the issue of basic trust that can form us, that allows us to move toward a vision of a more compassionate reality. He said those farmers had to believe in the resurrection because every spring they planned those seeds. Not unlike Paul's metaphor of a seed falling into the ground to be reborn as something new.

One summer we stopped to visit the graves of my Hermanson grandparents. At the same place we visited my Aunt Hildur's grave. She was a person of boldness. And she wrote a letter to Suzanne - a letter sent days before she died and arrived at our wedding - welcoming her to the family. An important letter that dealt with the past and opened the future. This visit was to honor and offer thanks for a person who lived out of the resurrection, practiced it in her living. This was not a visit to a dead past but a living reality. The meaning of my grandparents is in their risking, of trust, of leaving the past behind to create a new future.

Basic trust is hard to create. Some of us got it early in our families and it grows. Others didn't and that becomes their life issue. Can we trust reality? It is an issue we come back to, time and time again, until we get it and it forms us.

This question of whether these bones will live again is one that defines all of us. It is a question when life does not bear witness to good and but to evil. The fundamental issue when evil lives and the good die. Where is God?

This was the issue for the Jesus community. What now? Some ran away. Lost trust. Lost their nerve. Still looking among the tombs for life.

They had been an occupied people. They lived under foreign occupation and had internalized that reality. They were those whom society has tossed aside. They felt unwelcome. In the ministry of Jesus they had begun to discover hope, begun to trust God. They were beginning to resist the metaphor of occupation. They were no longer no people but were beginning to

experience themselves as the people of the way - the way of compassion and inclusion. Then this experience.

It is important to understand that resurrection for them was a common expectation. We moderns find it hard to understand resurrection. For moderns resurrection is impossible, except, of course, in the case of Jesus. For us it is a unique event. However, the ancients assumed resurrection for important heroes. It is what happened to sons of God and heroes. But Jesus did not fit well into this fraternity. For the ancients Jesus would not have been a likely candidate for resurrection. His death was not heroic. He was born a peasant and died a criminal. Yet his followers said of him what others said of Hercules or Caesar - he is resurrected. A nobody.

It is important to understand some of the metaphors used in the witness to the transformation the early community experienced. Jesus' blood spilt for all is an affirmation of transformation. Blood is symbolic of the spirit that flows through all, to energize, to give purpose. It is a spiritual reality that transforms our physical reality, Thus the blood of Jesus is an offer of a new covenant. It is about the relationship of God with the world. Thus, the blood is a restoration to the truth about reality not a sacrifice. With Jesus we see life full of the Grace of God. That is, an affirmation that in every nano second the sense of God is here, is now flowing through us.

It is important to know that an empty tomb would not be the proof of resurrection, nor was it a miracle for miracles were dime a dozen, nor was this some ghostly appearance. Paul's concept of the resurrection is bodily, but not physical. It is an affirmation that those who risk death will not be lost, and this is an experience that is true for all who risk, who live out of hope. It is a radical trust in the compassion of God, that despite the occupation of fear or enemies, one is not defined by negativity or occupation. The past does not define but the hope for the kingdom of God does. And Jesus worked faithfully for that kingdom despite the dangers. "Jesus is risen" is an affirmation that God's empire is the truth about reality, not Caesars.

What is truly remarkable is that the community thought that Jesus was risen. For he was not a hero. He led no armies. He inspired no rebellion. For those were the ones who would be resurrected, but not a peasant with a small compromised following. The faith statement was, it was Jesus who was raised not Caesar. The experienced went against expectations.

The early community experienced a resurrection and so can we. The clue is in this journey to the tombs, and the message Mary and Martha are to take back. "Meet me in Galilee." Having lost their nerve they found it as they went to Galilee in expectation. In the gathered community they told stories about how they felt about Jesus and how he had changed them. In his teachings they had an epiphany of God. They had experienced liberation from the external oppressor who had become internalized. The women said, "We are an important part of the kingdom." Others said, "Yes, we are included in God's reality." "We have transcended all the societal and religious ways that deny our humanity - we feel fully accepted - fully human." The nobody convinced them they were somebody to God.

The resurrection was experienced in the sharing of bread and wine, in the remembrances of their experiences, in the commitment to carrying on the message of the presence of God. In the doing of compassion they experienced resurrection. Jesus was a 'spirit person' (Marcus Borg) and the community had experienced the spirit of God in him and in their ongoing commitment to the way of love after he had died. In the image of blood, the blood or spirit of Jesus now flowed through them. In the going back to Galilee they reaffirmed their commitment and in that moment they experienced resurrection.

We make this affirmation every time we gather in community to celebrate the sense of God in our world. Every time we do an act of kindness, because the spirit of God flows through us, we

experience the resurrection. This is the affirmation that we can trust God to be with us and use us.

The followers of Jesus do not believe in him because of the resurrection. They believed in the resurrection because they first believed him and the spiritual life they had experienced. This is not a past event but a present experience. One that we can live out of. Resurrection, finally, is our decision to trust God, to give ourselves over to the Spirit we can discover in the teachings and life of Jesus. Every time we show compassion, act justly, care for the enemy, welcome the stranger, live in harmony with creation, we experience the resurrection. We go out in Resurrection.

I recommend Steven Patterson's book, *Beyond the Passion* - Fortress Press.

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