

Lenten Sermon Series: Surprised By Hope “Hope of the Resurrection”

Salem United Methodist Church

Matthew 4:1-11; Romans 5: 12-19; I Corinthians 15:35-49

March 9, 2014

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We are in the season of Lent. These forty days are set aside for us as a time of preparation as we journey through the cross to the Resurrection. This past Wednesday, the first day of Lent, ashes were placed on our foreheads in the sign of the cross to remind us of our mortality. The ashes remind us that we will die. The cross reminds us that Jesus did. Traditionally Lent is a season of penitence in which we examine our sins, make confession, receive forgiveness, and are recreated into a new person in Christ. All in which we then celebrate on Easter Sunday, the Day of Resurrection, the day of New Life. So talking about the Resurrection and the hope it brings is not really out of step with the Lenten journey. For us to experience Easter in its fullness, understanding the Hope of the Resurrection is crucial.

If someone were to ask you which is the most important to the Christian faith, the Crucifixion or the Resurrection, which one would you pick? Some may pick the Crucifixion because it is on the cross that Jesus “bore our griefs, and carried our sorrows” (Isaiah 53: 4). Handel uses this verse from Isaiah in the Passion part of his Messiah oratorio. And the Crucifixion is important to our faith. To Christians the cross is not just a method of execution, but a symbol of suffering and forgiveness; a symbol of mercy and love. But if there was no Resurrection, we may not have heard of Jesus. He would have been just one of many who were executed by the Roman Imperial Army with this extremely cruel method of crucifixion. It is the Resurrection of Jesus that initiated the Christian faith.

From the disciples of Jesus who saw, touched, and ate with their risen Lord to the early Christians who gathered in the morning of the first day of the week, to remember and celebrate this day as the day Jesus rose from the dead, the Christian faith began because these people experienced something new in the Resurrected Christ. They believed and passed this belief onto future generations. Without the Resurrection of Jesus there would be no Christian faith. The life and death of Jesus, his teachings, the miracles he did would all be recorded as some great teacher. So why do we believe in the resurrection? To answer this question, we need to know what happens to us when we die. What do you think happens to us when we die? A common view in 21st century is that when we die, our soul goes to heaven to be with God. The body is no longer needed and decays. The ancient Greeks believed this. It makes sense to us today since we have witnesses who have clinically died and been resuscitated. They talk about floating above their body, being drawn to a bright light, and experiencing a complete sense of peace and love. But this view of death does not connect us to Jesus’ resurrection.

Ancient cultures have had different beliefs in the afterlife. Emperors believed that when they died they became gods. Some believed like some do today, when you’re dead, you’re dead. Death is the end of life, but the dead person’s memory lives on. Others believed that the soul rests for a time and then is placed in a different body—a type of reincarnation belief. The Jews of Jesus time had several different beliefs. Some believed that death was the end. Some believed that the soul went somewhere else. And some believed that God would raise all people from the dead, that there would be a physical resurrection of all the dead in which our new physical form would be much better than the old one. The resurrection is a promised new creation. This is the view that the early Christians choose to believe. It substantiated what they experienced in Jesus. Three days after his Crucifixion there was an empty tomb. There was no body, no bones left, nothing. The only thing that remained in the empty tomb was the cloths that his body was wrapped in. All four gospels tell of the empty tomb and the appearances of the resurrected Jesus. He is seen in the same, yet different body. Jesus has meetings with his disciples. He appears and disappears through walls. He talks, listens, walks, touches, and eats. He is not just a resuscitated body, but is in some way made new. Jesus shows us that God’s promised new creation is begun in him. He has gone through death and come out on the other side. No one did this previous or since. The early followers of Jesus saw this as God’s new creation beginning which would include our resurrection as well. What is our resurrection?

Tonight a new TV series called, “The Resurrection,” will air on ABC. The story line has eight year old Jacob wake-up in a rice field in rural China. Thirty-two years before he drowned trying to rescue his aunt in Arcadia, Missouri. A federal agent brings him home to his parents who have gotten on with their lives after they lost their son. Now thirty two years older, they have an eight year old boy standing on their doorstep who claims

to be their son, Jacob. The storyline has this boy coming back from the dead and reuniting with his family. This is not a zombie show. The writers call this a resurrection. They even have the family's pastor claim the boy's return as a miracle of God. Based on a book of fiction, *The Returned*, by Jason Mott, this show will spark a lot of discussion about what resurrection is. As Christians we need to know what we believe. As much as anyone who has lost a loved one might want them back, resurrection is *not* a loved one coming back to life and showing up on our doorstep.

The Apostle Paul writes the best description of our resurrection in chapter 15 in his first letter to the Corinthians. He uses an analogy that we who are waiting for spring can understand. A seed or a bulb looks entirely different from the plant it will produce, yet it is the same species. Eugene Peterson in *The Message* interpreted Paul's words as this: "a dead seed and raising a live plant is a mere sketch at best, but perhaps it will help in approaching the mystery of the resurrection body, -but only if you keep in mind that when we're raised, we're raised for good, alive forever!" Perhaps this will help us understand. A bulb is a flower, but when it grows stems, leaves, and flowers it becomes even more of what the species is. When we are resurrected we will become ourselves again, but even more so. This leads us to the next logical question. So when will this resurrection take place? When God decides at the end of time. All creation including humans will be transformed. God will create a new heaven and a new earth.

The next question might be asked. So what happens to us between our last breath in this life and whenever God decides at the end of time? We rest in Paradise as Jesus suggested on the cross. He promised to the one criminal that he will be with Jesus in Paradise. The Gospel of John has Jesus allude to this, too, when he says that his Father's house has many dwelling places and he is going to prepare a place for us. The term used for dwelling places means a temporary lodging. This explanation may help us understand what happens when we die and offers us hope for our loved ones who have died and offers us hope as we face our own morality, but what about now? Is God's new creation only happening at the end of time? Did God just show us the glimpse of this new creation in Jesus and then forget us?

No, we get glimpse of this new creation when receive a new kind of knowing, a knowing of love. Bishop Wright who wrote the book, *Surprised By Hope*, from which this sermon series is based suggests that love is the deepest kind of knowing, because "it is love that, while completely engaging with reality other than itself, affirms and celebrates that other-than-self reality." He states that the resurrection "is about a new bodily life *in* this world and *for* this world. God's new creation has begun and we have a job to do. The resurrection empowers us to live in new ways today." This occurs he says when we bring beauty to our communities, unleash justice for someone who is oppressed, or show compassion to a hurting person. With these acts we are being agents of Resurrection Hope in this old world.

The United Methodist Church is committed to be part of God's new creation process. They are imagining a new creation in sub-Saharan Africa where no one dies of malaria. Every 60 seconds, malaria claims a life. For the past few years the Church has collected money to buy and give bed nets to families in Africa. With these bed nets, deaths from malaria have been reduced by 50% in five years. Now we are extending our efforts in a project called "Imagine No Malaria." With support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and other efforts, we have an opportunity to eradicate deaths from malaria in Africa within a few years. The reality of this is happening because of recent medical developments in vaccines, working pesticides, effective and less expensive diagnostic testing. The "Imagine No Malaria" project is a fourfold effort of prevention, treatment, education, and improving communications. The UMC is committed to raising \$75 million to eradicate malaria. The Baltimore-Washington Conference is committed to raise \$2.1 million by 2015. Each church is asked to commit to "Imagine No Malaria" so we can be agents of God's new creation. During this season of Lent I am inviting us to practice the spiritual discipline of fasting for one meal a week or fasting from something else that you may regularly spend money. With the money saved from that meal or expenditure, I invite us to give it to "Imagine No Malaria" as we join in with God in bringing Resurrection Hope to Africa.

Reflection Question: How can I be an agent of the hope of resurrection, a co-creator of God's new creation?

Resources: *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds.; *Surprised By Hope* by N. T. Wright; www.imagenomalaria.com

