

Lenten Sermon Series: (Re)Discovering Jesus: Rebel, Revolutionary, Radical
Easter Sermon Title: The Revolutionary Resurrection
John 20:1-18; I Corinthians 15:19-26; Acts 10:34-43
Salem United Methodist Church
March 27, 2016; Resurrection Sunday
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For forty days we have been preparing for this moment, the celebration of the Resurrection of our Lord. We call these forty days Lent. During this past season, we at Salem have been examining our relationship with Jesus Christ so we could have a deeper understanding of his Crucifixion and his Resurrection. For four Sundays we have examined how Jesus is a rebel, a radical, and started a revolution that changed the world.

As individuals we remember important, life-changing events in our lives: our first kiss, our first dance, graduation, receiving an important degree or certificate, our first job, our wedding day, the birth of a child or grandchild, moving into our first apartment or house, a special birthday, etc. Also, collectively we remember national tragedies. There are a few who still remember where they were when they heard Pearl Harbor was attacked. My grandparents remembered walking home from church when a neighbor who heard it on the radio, ran out of his house and told them. Some of us remember where we were when President Kennedy was killed. I was sitting at my fifth grade desk. Students were sent home early that day so we could watch the events unfold on TV. And many of us remember where we were on a clear Tuesday morning on September 11, 2001. However, those who were born in this century do not have this memory. We do remember the important, life changing events of our lives.

The Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus was an important, life-changing event for the disciples. When he was arrested, they were afraid and hid; because they thought they would also be arrested. So the disciples were not witnesses of the Crucifixion with one exception. The Gospel of John reports that one unnamed disciple and Mary Magdalene stood at the foot of the cross and watched the tortuous, slow execution. The disciples were still hiding on that morning after the Sabbath when Mary Magdalene runs back to them and tells him that the body is missing. Two disciples go with her to check out her story. The tomb was empty. Can you imagine the fear that crept over them? Jesus is missing. Who would have stolen his body, and for what reason? The disciples witnessed the collision of the political and religious powers that resulted in Jesus' Crucifixion. Would these same powers blame the theft of the body on the disciples? Would they be caught and crucified, too? And also there is just something eerie about the body of a loved one being stolen. There is no comfort in the not-knowing where that the body is and the thought that it may not be cared for properly. In the midst of their grief, the not-knowing what happened to Jesus' body must have been overwhelming. And then Jesus quietly appears to Mary and reveals his resurrected self to her. Upon hearing his voice and seeing him, grief and fear turns into excitement and joy. Mary becomes the first one to report that Jesus is alive! As the disciples reflected on all the teachings of Jesus, some of these teachings began to make sense. Jesus had told them that he would die and rise again after three days. Then Jesus appears to them over and over again continuing to train them to carry the message of God's love to the world before he ascends into heaven. The Crucifixion and the Resurrection were events that the disciples never forgot and they told it over and over again.

Paul's recording of the events is the earliest writing we have of it. Paul was not a disciple of Jesus before the Resurrection, but became a believer after he encountered the Risen Jesus. His letter to the new church which he started in the city of Corinth predates the writing of the Gospels. The events of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection of Jesus were later recorded in not one, but all four of the Gospels. Each writer tells the Good News of Jesus differently with different stories, but these two events are the climax of each Gospel. In the book, *The Acts of the Apostles*, the retelling of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection becomes an important part of sharing with others that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, the Savior. The Crucifixion and the Resurrection was a life-

changing event that they could not forget. The Crucifixion and the Resurrection began a revolution without military force. It is a revolution of love, grace, and transformation. It is a revolution that changed and still is changing the world.

It changed the Roman Empire. At the beginning, those who believed in Jesus began a renegade movement throughout the Roman Empire. Roman citizens were to publicly pay homage to a statute of Caesar by giving an offering and declaring, "Caesar is Lord." The followers of Jesus defied Caesar's decrees by claiming that there is another king: Jesus. They would publicly declare "Jesus is Lord," knowing that they would be arrested, tortured, and killed as a traitor for making this statement. These early Christians were known for their acts of selfless love, a love that defied greed and hate. The revolution continued to grow. In the fourth century, the Emperor Constantine became a Christian and the Christian Era in the west began. The church grew. Cathedrals were built. There was a Christian culture throughout Europe which was transported across the Atlantic Ocean to the colonies. There were different flavors of the Christian faith in North America. Each thinking their way was the better way. Sometimes thinking their way was the only way. For instance, in the early Maryland colony the Catholics and Protestants fought for control. As we became a nation, James Madison made sure that all religions would be protected under the law by writing it into the Constitution.

Even with this very brief Christian history lesson, there were people and still are people who doubt the Resurrection of Jesus. Probably if we were truly honest, there is not a person in this room that has not at one time or another doubted the authenticity of the Resurrection. We wonder, "Is this whole Christian faith based on a myth that the disciples dreamed up to save themselves?" Thomas Jefferson believed so. He believed in Jesus, but not the miracles of Jesus which included the Resurrection. He constructed his own Bible cutting out the miracles and pasting together just the moral teachings of Jesus. Jefferson was a product of his era, the Age of Reason. If it made sense then it could be believed. Miracles and the Resurrection don't make sense. They rely on faith. Jesus spoke to this kind of faith when a father brought his ill son to him. The father asked Jesus if there was anything he could do to help the child. Jesus said to the father, "All things can be done for the one who believes." The father told Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief!" and Jesus healed the child (Mark 9:23-24). This statement, "I believe; help my unbelief," is a great prayer, because our faith is always a work in progress. When a devastating event happens in our lives, we want to believe, but doubt creeps in. We want a sign. When someone we love dies, we want assurance that they are with God. We want to know that this Resurrection stuff is for real.

How can we know? Some see the new life of Resurrection in the new sprouts pushing through the ground, or in the spring blossoms. Walking through the cherry blossoms can be a type of resurrecting experience. They are signs of hope. Some have experienced this new life in their own lives. We have seen how the resurrection power of Jesus has guided us, provided for us, and transformed our lives. For some of us it has been a gradual, daily change. For others like the Apostle Paul, the change has been dramatic. We see the power of the resurrection in how people who hate or people who are apathetic become loving rebels for Jesus. As people of the Resurrection, we hold the rallying flag of love and grace when we spend hours of our time and monetary resources meeting the needs of the hurting and the poor. We become radicals for Jesus when we work for justice and offer mercy. Some of us work quietly while others have become public figures. Believing in the Resurrection is a process of dying to an old way of living and being open to becoming new creations in Christ. When we realize the Resurrection is real we can be devoted to taking up the cause of love and justice, to changing the world with Christ's peace, love, joy, and hope. The offer to become a rebel or a radical like Jesus, the offer to continue his revolution still exists. Just pray, "I believe; help my unbelief."

Reflection Questions: Is this a prayer that you can pray? How have you seen the radical love of Jesus in your life? And how has it changed you?

Resources: *The Renegade Gospel* by Mike Slaughter; "How Thomas Jefferson Created His Own Bible," <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/>

