

Easter, Year C
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As I reflected upon what I have said in the past on Easter Sunday, and remembered other Easter sermons I have heard something about them all struck me as very strange. Everything is so, well... so *theological*. In an effort to explain the power of the resurrection I and many other preachers ceaselessly resort to theological abstractions, and use terms like “forgiveness of sins” and “reconciliation with God” as though we knew exactly what these phrases mean, and why these concepts should matter to people struggling to make sense of themselves and the global society we have created over the centuries, and which now, as always, staggers unsteadily toward a future we do not know and cannot control, try as we might. So this morning I propose to abandon theology altogether in favor of history; let us just look at what happened and see if perhaps there is a message that makes sense for us today.

When a social movement is subjected to violence, the advocates of that movement do one of two things. Either they disperse in the fear that they will be next, or they plan revenge of one sort or another. We are seeing even now something of that second sort of response in Russia, as Doku Umarov has claimed responsibility for the Moscow subway attacks which he declares are revenge for killing of civilians by Russian security forces. This is the pattern of

this world. If you kill us and our leaders, then we kill you and your leaders. This pattern is broken only when those who initiate the killing are powerful enough to establish a monopoly of violence, in which case the advocates of the cause disperse in fear, and flee for their lives, waiting perhaps for their chance, but more commonly disappearing altogether.

But this is not what happened at Easter. At Easter the people who loved Jesus best, who followed him longest, who sacrificed the most for the sake of sitting at his feet, reacted to his death not by swearing revenge or by running away in the face of overwhelming violence. Instead they shattered this universal pattern of response to the way the world is by reaching out in reconciling love to the very people who executed him and to those who collaborated in that execution. Those who loved and followed Jesus reached out to those who had killed him saying “you are part of us, you are beloved, you are accepted,” and they would not stop reaching out in this reconciling love no matter how much violence those who did not want to hear this message visited upon them. They just kept coming, never fleeing, never swearing revenge no matter what was done to them, but only reaching out, only calling out in the voice of the crucified one with a message of unconditional love for all.

That folks is why the resurrection of Jesus is important not just then, but now, and why it will always be the world’s one great hope. We don’t know exactly what the resurrection of Jesus looked like, but we can see its effect in history, and that effect was world shaking. For the resurrection of Jesus

shattered the pattern of violence that characterizes human interaction over the millennia by transforming those who understood its meaning into people who suddenly grasped the essential unity of the entire world before God and who therefore sought to break down all the barriers that divided people, barriers which, because of how we are, created the conditions that make violence not just inevitable, but also necessary. We know that is the meaning of the resurrection not because of their theological talk, but because that is what they actually did.

So amidst all the confusing welter of theological talk we need to be able to sort through the historical facts enough to notice that this transformation is miraculous; it is in fact the greatest miracle ever recorded. People so caught up in the life of Jesus that in the wake of his execution they completely transcended the human condition and began to relate to the world through love, not fear, not anger, not revenge, not insecurity, but love. They began, in other words, to relate to the world the way God does, not the way people do. Again, that is a miracle – there is no other word for it - and I dare say it is the miracle created by the resurrection.

That miracle is still at work today, still transforming this world, but we need to know where to look for it. We see this miracle not simply or merely where we see Christians. We see it rather where we see that same transcendence of the human condition that characterized the lives of those who loved Jesus. We see it where the cycle of violence is broken not because the victims of violence flee in the face of overwhelming power, but where the victims of violence refuse

to become victims and instead reach out to their persecutors in reconciliation. We see that power in the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was assassinated on this very day forty-two years ago. We see that power in King not because he was a Baptist, but because he understood what many of his contemporaries fighting for the same cause of equal rights could not see, which is that the root problem was not simply that some laws were unjust, but rather the root problem was the pattern of separating people, of dividing humanity in arbitrary ways, and using violence to sustain that division. And so, under the spell of the resurrection of Jesus, King sought not to conquer, but to unite, not to destroy his enemies, but to reconcile with them, and so he would not stop loving those who hated him and his cause no matter what they did. In that way he overthrew not simply some unjust laws, but the whole perspective that had sustained those unjust laws. That is the power of the resurrection at work.

We saw it a few years ago in an Amish community rocked by the murder of eleven of their own people by an insane man who then killed himself. The response was astounding; they forgave completely, they reached out in love to each other and to the widow of the gunman. That is the power of the resurrection at work. We saw it in Gandhi, who led a nation into independence not by the sword, but through peaceful protest and negotiation. That too is the power of the resurrection at work. We see this power whenever we see people so completely transcending the human condition that they break the cycle of violence that begets violence by confronting with reconciling love those who

would perpetuate that cycle. Make no mistake, it is not people who do this to and for themselves; wherever we see this we are seeing the presence of the divine transforming human nature.

Whatever theological formulations we continue to employ as a means of understanding what we have seen must emerge from the historical effect the resurrection of Jesus had on real, live people. Forgiveness of sins is a valuable concept if it reflects not merely the sentimental notion that God forgives me for doing bad things, but also, and more profoundly, if it also denotes that self transcendence that comes about as people break the cycle of violence out of which the condition of doing bad things arises. Reconciliation with God is a wonderful idea, but it means nothing if that reconciliation is not manifested tangibly in the hearts of people who then actively seek reconciliation with each other. To be relevant to this world *now*, in other words, we must root ourselves in the actual effect of the resurrection of Jesus on people *then*. Only as we surrender to the power of the risen one and break the cycle of retributive violence that so characterizes this world do we discover what it really means to live in the power of the resurrection.

We may, indeed I suppose we must, continue to press for technological solutions to many of the problems that beset the world today. And my great hope is that those solutions will come before the world is forced to endure any serious or lasting hardship. Those solutions, as valuable and as important for our future as they may be, will not change the characteristic human approach to

life. Those solutions will not make us more humane, or fair, or just. They may create new conditions of living, but will not create new ways of living with each other. But we need not wait to discover a new way of living with each other, for the world has already seen it, and born witness over the centuries to the transformation that it brings. It is not what happens simply when people become Christian. It is what happens when, under the spell of the cross and resurrection of Jesus, people transcend the basic human response to the world and begin to reach out to those they do not know, and cannot perhaps even understand, not with suspicion or fear, but with compassion and reconciling love. In whatever place or culture or religious setting we see that, there we see the world's one great hope expressed.