

Resurrection Today
A Sermon on Luke 24:1-12 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ April 17, 2022

You may have noticed that Christmas and Easter are the two biggest celebrations of our church year. Christmas and Easter are remarkable in the way memorable, detailed accounts in the Gospel stories point toward ideas about God that are otherwise difficult for us to comprehend.

Christmas points to the idea that God's love for humankind is so strong that God chose to take on flesh and dwell among us in the person of Christ Jesus. This is the kind of idea you can explain to a four year old, and the story of Mary and Joseph and the birth of Jesus illustrates it vividly. This story is especially powerful and effective for us because many of the critical details of the story are common experiences for people in all times and places. It is common for a young woman to become pregnant before the marriage ceremony. It is unfortunately quite common for authoritarian governments to force people to move, at least temporarily, to one place or another, as Mary and Joseph were forced to travel to Bethlehem for the census. As we gather for worship we can guess that, somewhere in Ukraine today, a woman is in the process of giving birth to a baby in a bomb shelter, with little concern for cleanliness or comfort. The story of Christmas is a story that easily and frequently touches our common experience.

Easter points to the idea that God's love has the power to overcome our experience of death and loss. This is a story that is more difficult for us to understand. There are four Gospel accounts of the resurrection, each slightly different, as we would expect when four people are telling the same story.

These accounts don't have much in common with what any of us have experienced in our lives. None of us has witnessed the physical resurrection of a beloved friend. None of us have gone to the cemetery two or three days after the burial and found an empty grave. Mark's Gospel account is closest to real life. Three women discovered the empty tomb. An angelic figure attempted to reassure them. They fled from the tomb in terror and told no one about it. Yet the event at the heart of the story of Easter, the physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead, is not, and will never be part of our common experience.

This does not mean that the story is not true. The story of Easter points to the reality that God's love has the power to overcome our experience of death and loss. Easter is not something you can explain to a four year old child. It requires more experience in life, and more time in examining our lives, to see what resurrection looks like for you and for me. Today I want to suggest four qualities of the resurrection we seek.

The first is most evident; resurrection only comes in response to acknowledging a death of some sort. Resurrection does not happen in the context of pride and shouts of victory and people raising their fists in the air. Resurrection is only a possibility after we have emptied ourselves. Resurrection is only a possibility after we admit our losses and failures.

This is why we engage in the liturgy of reconciliation. This is why we say the prayer of confession. We receive God's resurrecting power in our lives only after we have made space for God by emptying ourselves, by admitting our wrongs.

A good example of the power of admitting our wrongs happened in South Africa, in the years following the end of apartheid. The primary purpose of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee was to bring out the truth of crimes committed during apartheid. It is interesting that the person chosen to lead the nation in creating a record of the harms of apartheid was the Anglican Archbishop, Desmond Tutu, a man who continually encouraged people to follow Jesus' example of truth telling and humility and to engage in the practice of confession.

Resurrection takes place after we have acknowledged our mistakes and our emptiness. The second idea is quite related to the first; resurrection may take place only in the context of seeking to correct current and past mistakes. There is no hope of resurrection for us if we refuse to engage in restorative justice.

We see examples of this in the brokenness and the mistakes of our city. The most visible mistake in the life of Syracuse sits just a few blocks from St. Paul's. When the leaders of the city planned to build new interstate highways around and through the city in the 1950s and 60s they took care to not destroy the

neighborhood where I live, and to not have it run through the center of Syracuse University. But it seems they had little concern for neighborhoods comprised primarily of black families.

Great harm was done. Imagine arriving for worship at St. Philip's Episcopal Church and being told that your church building would be destroyed, would be completely removed, in order to make way for six lanes of traffic on Interstate 81. Imagine watching not just your home, but most of your neighborhood be flattened by wrecking balls and bulldozers.

The black community of Syracuse is the poorest black population in any major American city. There is a reason for that. The businesses built up over decades by grandfathers and grandmothers were destroyed. The homes lovingly built and cared for by generations of families were removed. There will be no hope of resurrection for the city of Syracuse until we engage in the work of correcting for our past mistakes.

We must tell the truth about our emptiness and our mistakes. Then we must seek to correct past mistakes. The third idea is quite related to the first and the second: the richness and fullness of resurrection is the result of us being willing to do something new.

I have seen something that can only be described as resurrection during the past six months at St. Paul's Church. The acknowledgement of emptiness happened during worship one Sunday, about six months ago. The congregation was relatively large that particular day. When the time came for the procession I was standing alone at the back of the nave. I carried the cross in the procession alone. I prepared for the Eucharist alone. I served communion alone.

In our church we understand that the priest standing alone is a symbol of emptiness. When the priest is standing alone there is no celebration. That's because the liturgy is the work of the people.

The response of our vestry to this day of emptiness was to decide to correct the mistake. The response of several of them was to do something new, something they had not done before. Four members volunteered to serve as Eucharistic Ministers. We held a training, and in a single day we doubled our number of Lay Eucharistic Ministers serving at the 10 a.m. service. And we have experienced a sort of resurrection in our worship.

Somewhat ironically, the day I felt this change as resurrection for the first time was last Sunday, Palm Sunday. As we prepared to distribute the bread and the wine, with three Lay Eucharistic Ministers taking the lead, I said to myself, "This is what resurrection looks like!"

God calls you to do all of these things in your life. God calls us to name the places in our lives that have died. God calls us to seek to correct past mistakes. God calls us to do something new. God calls us to do this continuously. This is the fourth idea about resurrection. Resurrection is a continuous process.

Four and a half years ago I experienced death in a most difficult way, at the time of the death of my wife. We had been married for thirty years at that time. Nancy's death brought the death of many parts of my life.

What I have learned in the last four and a half years is that resurrection is a continuous process. By this, I mean that the process is never really over. After two years I might have thought I was finished. I wasn't. After four years I might have thought I was finished. I wasn't. My experience of living the resurrection life is that it is not something we finish.

If you and I are living the resurrection life then we will be constantly engaged in this process. God is in the center of this activity of resurrection because our trust in God, and the love we have received from God, are the foundation of this work of resurrection. I would describe resurrection less as something that happens to you, and more as something you engage in.

In this we follow Jesus. Jesus did not wait for someone else to do the important work. Jesus gave his whole self to the effort. Resurrection may happen in some way in future, but God is calling you and me to live in the power of the resurrection today, this day. This is the meaning of Easter for us today.