

TIME TO WAKE UP!
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
April 24, 2011

Reading: Matthew 28: 1-10 (NEB)

The Sabbath was over, and it was about daybreak on Sunday, when Mary of Magdala and the other Mary came to look at the grave. Suddenly there was a violent earthquake; an angel of the Lord descended from heaven; he came to the stone and rolled it away, and sat himself down on it. His face shone like lightning; his garments were white as snow. At the sight of him the guards shook with fear and lay like the dead.

The angel then addressed the women: "You," he said, "Have nothing to fear. I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; he has been raised again, as he said he would be. Come and see the place where he was laid, and then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has been raised from the dead and is going on before you into Galilee; there you will see him.' That is what I had to tell you."

They hurried away from the tomb in awe and great joy, and ran to tell the disciples. Suddenly Jesus was there in their path. He gave them his greeting, and they came up and clasped his feet, falling prostrate before him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and take word to my brothers that they are to leave for Galilee. They will see me there."

A friend sent Mimi the story about the man who is driving along a highway and sees a rabbit jump out into the middle of the road. He does everything in his power to avoid hitting the rabbit but the hare jumped right in front of the car.

The man is a sensitive fellow and a member of PETA. He stops his car, gets out, and runs to see the rabbit's fate. Much to his dismay the rabbit is dead, but more than that the man realizes that it is none other than the Easter Bunny. He weeps in the knowledge that he has killed the Easter Bunny.

A few moments later a beautiful woman is driving down the highway. She sees the man crying and pulls off the side of the road. She walks back to the man and asks what is wrong. "I feel terrible," said the man. "I accidentally hit the Easter Bunny with my car and I killed him!"

The woman says, “Not to worry.” She runs to her car, reaches in her travel bag and pulls out a spray can. She walks over to the limp, dead Easter Bunny, bends down, and sprays the contents all over his fur.

The Easter Bunny jumps up, waves his paw at the two of them and hops off down the road. About ten feet down the road he stops, turns around, and waves again. He does this until he is out of sight.

The man is astonished. He turns to the woman and asks, “What’s in that can? What did you spray on the Easter Bunny?” The woman turns the can around so the man can read the label. The can reads: “Hair spray – restores life to dead hair with permanent results!”

This is of course Easter Sunday when words, meanings, images, and metaphors get all confused with Christian Jewish hopes and pagan celebrations. A careful reader of the New Testament will find differing accounts about this Sunday and the meaning of the resurrection story. For more than twenty centuries we have wrangled with the radical proclamation, “He is not here, he has risen.” The Greek word is *anastasis* and it means to raise up, to awaken, as to rise up from sleep. What we cannot agree upon is whether this is meant to be understood as a physical resurrection of Jesus or a metaphorical resurrection. There are witnesses who declare that the tomb was empty, a physical fact. There are others who speak of walking with a stranger whom they did not recognize as Jesus until he broke bread with them. And there are those who speak of Jesus as a apparition or vision that was so powerful as to be unmistakably real in their souls. It is not likely that we will resolve these perspectives in the next two millennia.

Whether you believe in the physical resurrection or resurrection as metaphor or parable is not for me to arbitrate. I also think it misses a much deeper point about belief in the resurrection. It evades the question of what the resurrection means and how does belief in the resurrection shape Christian discipleship. My belief in the resurrection is not about a corpse or a symbol. My belief in the resurrection is about how I live my life sharing with God the restoration of justice and peace in this world. To get to that conclusion I invite you to go back with me to first century Palestine.

Caesar Augustus was the adopted son of Julius Caesar. Augustus means “the revered one.” But he was also known as the Divine One, God, Son of God, God of God, Lord, Redeemer, Liberator, Savior of the World, and Prince of Peace. Perhaps this helps us understand the tension between Jews and the Emperor, whom they refused to bow down to or worship. “Thou shall have no other gods before me” is still non-negotiable in Judaism. As Prince of Peace, Augustus meant, of course, *Pax Romana*, the Peace of Rome. It was a peace imposed by the might of the Roman Legion using conscripts from the countries Rome occupied. Yes, law and order were effectively administered and that allowed the free flow of commerce. But it was peace by coercion.

Like empires everywhere in the history of the world peace was achieved by violent means. There was no tolerance for dissent, universal human rights were negligible unless you were a citizen, and the poor were sorely oppressed. Family farms were stripped from their owners and the elite were granted large estates, what we might call agribusiness today. The dispossessed lived hand-to-mouth day by day. It was as simple as this: If you did not find a day job your family did not eat that day.

Violence and injustice were the common experience of most people. This was the kind of imperial injustice that brought Jesus to the cross. Pontius Pilot and Augustus would have been quite certain that the matter was settled there. End of story. The iron glove of Rome smoothed out a little ripple in Jerusalem.

But quietly and steadily a rumor began to waft about the Mediterranean basin. “He is risen.” The stone was rolled away and the centurions were flat on their backs seized in fear. Rome had put Jesus in his place but the women reported to the disciples He is not here. He will meet you in Galilee. Witnesses report he is cooking fish for his disciples. Some see him in the upper room. He is revealed again and again in the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup. And then these Christian Jews create the first and most basic affirmation of their faith, “Let every tongue proclaim, ‘Jesus Christ is Lord.’”

Do you hear that subversive message? Caesar Augustus is not lord. Jesus is Lord. Augustus is not the Son of God. Jesus is the Son of God. Augustus is not the Prince of Peace. Jesus is the Prince of Peace. *Pax Romana* is washed away by *Pax Christi*. And then the disciples began to think back. “Do you remember when Jesus said, ‘Give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and give unto God the things that are God’s?’” Was Jesus just being a pragmatist? You know, everybody has to pay taxes, why fight it? Or was Jesus saying that there are limits to the power of Rome? There is yet a god who outranks the emperor.

My belief in the resurrection is the conviction that God is at work in the world seeking to undermine every system of oppression, poverty, and violence. This is the Way of the Cross. My faith in the resurrected Jesus is my trust that non-violence and

justice is the future of the world. The Roman imperial model insists that there must first be armed victory before there can be peace. Most empires have followed the Roman model. Christ incarnates the Jewish revolutionary model of peace through justice. As Dom Crossan declared, “Put more fully, the program of Jesus and Paul is the sequence of *covenant, nonviolence, justice, and peace.*”¹

This is the meaning of the resurrection to me. And what I hope you notice about it is the fact that it is a physical resurrection. God is restoring the world through the hands of women and men who pray, work, and give their lives for the wholeness of the human race and the earth. The resurrection is the hearts, minds, and hands of people just like you and me who seek the transformation of a violent and greedy world into a place where people can live out their lives with dignity.

The resurrection is the work of the Mayflower Clinic that our Muslim friends have organized for low-income people in Wichita. The resurrection is the patient advocacy of God’s love that knows no borders. The resurrection happens every first and third Saturday when you distribute hygiene products to poor people, or provide the means for us to do so. The resurrection is the Mennonite Central Committee that sends its workers to rebuild homes in Southern states that have been ravaged by tornadoes these last few weeks.

Allow me to share this story of God’s justice. It is the story of an old Southern slave who was sent to Washington D.C. after President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. He worried about his old master and longed for his

¹ John Dominic Crossan, “Bodily-Resurrection Faith,” *The Resurrection of Jesus* by John Dominic Crossan and N.T. Wright (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2006), p. 184.

Georgia family. For many years he carefully saved what money he could earn to buy a train ticket home. Finally he had saved enough money.

It was quite a sight to see this old black man with a very dark face and a shock of white hair running down the platform and just barely catching the last car. His shoes were covered with dust and his bib overalls were faded and worn. Every seat was taken so he stood in the doorway, wearily shifting from foot to foot. At last a young brother saw the old fellow and said, "Take my seat, Uncle." The tired old man gratefully sat down.

Very soon the conductor came along, calling loudly, "Tickets! Tickets!" As he reached a lady in the seat behind the former slave, she said, "Oh, sir! I have no ticket, but *you* must not put me off. Last year the doctors said my husband had tuberculosis, and that his only chance of recovery was to go South. So we sold a few things, and got money enough to send him to Georgia. Yesterday I got a telegram saying he was dying. I must go to him, but I have no money. Please, don't put me off."

The kind-hearted conductor was touched, but told her, "Rules are rules. Your story touches me deeply, madam, but if I do not put you off, I will lose my job. You'll have to get off at the next stop."

He came to the old Negro and demanded his ticket. He looked up at the conductor and said, "I speck, Conductor, you will have to put me off too."

The conductor spoke gruffly. "What do you mean? This woman

has some excuse, but you—if it were not for the time, I would stop the train and put you off on the roadside. Get off at the next stop!"

"Yes, sir!" said the tired old man.

As the train slowed down, he pulled his Georgia ticket out of his pocket. His birth home pulled at his heart, but a greater love pulled him more. When the train stopped he rose up, stepped to the lady's seat, and with splendid courtesy bowed like a courier of the old school, and said, "Here's your ticket to Georgia, ma'am." He climbed down the steps of the car and started on his long tramp to Georgia. He was buoyed by the compassion of God.

That is a resurrection story embodied and literal. That is a resurrection story of God's kingdom of peace and justice.

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