



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: April 12, 2009 EASTER

The Art of Practicing Resurrection, Robert B. Culp

Mark 16:1-8

William Sloane Coffin once remarked that what makes Easter so much fun is all the finery – the bunnies and eggs, the baskets and bonnets, the forsythia and cherry blossoms, and all the signs of a warmer, more colorful season that is coming soon. But what makes Easter so exciting, he said, is the cosmic quality of it. Because Easter has far less to do with one man's escape from the grave than with the victory of seemingly powerless love over loveless power, which hints at the deeper meaning of resurrection.

But “resurrection,” let's be honest about this, is a term with which we struggle, especially in the church. Toward the end of one of her recent books, Nora Gallagher writes, “We spend so much time in the church ‘believing’ in the resurrection or ‘not believing’ (six impossible things before breakfast) that we may lose the point. What if the resurrection is not about the appearances of Jesus alone, but also about what those appearances point to, what they asked? And it is finally what we do with them that matters – make them into superstitions, or use them as stepping stones to new life. We have to practice resurrection.”

But how do you and I practice resurrection? How do we put such an enormous reality into practice in our own lives? I suspect there are many ways for us to do this, and that a great deal of what we do in all our Christian practices (worship, prayer, showing hospitality, working for peace and justice) and the whole of the Christian way of life can be seen as ways to practice resurrection.

But I like how Wendell Berry (a Tennessee farmer, activist, and poet) offers his own poetic answer as to how we are to practice resurrection today. He writes:

“So, friends, every day do something that won't compute.

Love the Lord. Love the world. Work for nothing.

Take all that you have and be poor.

Love someone who does not deserve it.

Denounce the government and embrace the flag.

Hope to live in that free republic for which it stands.

Give your approval to all you cannot understand.

Praise ignorance, for what man has not encountered
he has not destroyed.

Ask the questions that have no answers.

Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.

Go with your love to the fields.
Lie easy in the shade and rest your head in her lap.
Swear allegiance to what is nighest your thoughts.
Be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Be joyful ... though you have considered the facts.
Practice resurrection.”

That would have been difficult counsel for those women who were visiting the site of Jesus’ tomb just days after his death on Golgotha. They considered the “facts” of all those events of the past week – how glorious songs of “Hosanna!” had turned into angry shouts of “Crucify!” ... how Judas had betrayed their Lord Jesus for 30 pieces of silver after sharing in the Passover Meal ... how Jesus had prayed fervently in the Garden of Gethsemane while his disciples failed to keep vigil as he prayed ... how Jesus had been arrested, tried, and crucified between two thieves on a crude cross of wood, and then was buried in a borrowed tomb.

Even with their eyes closed, they could still see those three crosses, dark and angular against the darkened sky. Even with their fingers in their ears, they could still hear the sounds that had been made atop that hill outside the city – the pounding of nails into human flesh, the cry of thirst, the muted buzz of the crowd, even the sound of the heat of the day ... like a muffled drum or the beating of a heart. And in their own hearts, the wondrous promises Jesus had made and the hopes they had felt deeply for the dawning of a new day were now dashed to the ground, and a broken emptiness was all that they felt inside.

Indeed, those women making their way to Jesus’ tomb knew all-too-well the harsh facts of their Good Friday world, as do we, living in a world where the fears and anxieties, the hurts and hungers seem to dominate our headlines every day, and have caused many of us somehow to lose our stride, our hope, our joy.

Yet, Wendell Berry’s poem and our scripture text this morning encourage us to “practice resurrection” by expressing a defiant joy and by spreading signs of a defiant hope. I am using the word “defiant” because both joy and hope seem to have a “nevertheless” or an “in spite of” quality about them.

Joy is defiant in that it appears where it wills. Joy isn’t earned, it’s not achieved, it’s not some sort of accomplishment on our part. Nor is joy dependent upon external circumstances. Rather, as it says in the old spiritual, “This joy I have, the world didn’t give it, the world can’t take it away.”

Barbara Brown Taylor gets at this meaning of joy when she writes, “That is what makes joy different from happiness or pleasure or fun. All those depend on positive conditions – good health, good job, happy family, lots of toys. The only condition for joy is the presence of God. Joy happens,” she notes, “when God is present and people know it ... which means that it can erupt in a depressed economy, in the middle of war, in an intensive care waiting room.”

In other words, joy can be found anywhere because God can be found anywhere. Joy can show up in the oddest places because God shows up in the oddest places, the most unexpected places, including those places where we have first considered some grim facts, like the fact of the cold reality of death. In the resurrection, Jesus appears in the most unlikely place of all – in the land of the living after he has died. And the response is great joy. It is not something his followers earned or could have achieved, because joy is given only as a gift.

The founding document of our nation’s birth speaks of our right to “the pursuit of happiness” ... and my, how have we have embraced that pursuit! In fact, we spend a great deal of our lives doing just that – relentlessly, doggedly, breathlessly pursuing those conditions that will bring us happiness. Much of our free market

economy is based on the promise of happiness, or something like it, if we will just buy this product or that service being sold. Every single day, we are told such things as this – drive this car, take this cruise, and you will be happy; pursue this career, make this investment and earn this income, and you will be happy.

And so we set our minds to pursue such happiness as is being offered, as a dog pursues a rabbit ... with singular intent, panting all the way. But what if none of that is what life is really all about? Joy is defiant enough to ask that question. What if what we long for is not something that can be pursued? What if our heart's desire is not something that can be placed on our "to do" list? What if our single-minded pursuit of happiness threatens to cause us to miss the joy that can only be received as a gift, in the surprising presence of God?

You see, the joy we are offered as followers of the Lord is defiant. It is oblivious to circumstances. It defies our ability to pursue or deserve or achieve.

And the hope we are offered is defiant as well. It begins in the defiance of death itself. The resurrection of Christ is the reminder that our God is the kind of God who insists on having the last word. The second-to-last word, which may be very powerful, can be given over to something else – despair, hopelessness, disease, violence, even death itself. But our God is the kind of God who insists on having the very last word. And that word is always a hopeful word, a healing word, a word of peace, a word of comfort, a word of life. I wonder – can you hear the defiance in such an affirmation? To practice resurrection means to live with that kind of defiant hope, a hope that refuses to bend to circumstances or even to bow to the presence of death.

The author E. B. White once wrote an essay about his wife Catherine when she was approaching her own death. She was an avid gardener, and every year she carefully planned the garden that would be hers, generating a new diagram for each year's planting, and ordering from a variety of her favorite seed catalogues. After she became ill in her last year of life, she managed somehow to get herself outside at planting time in the fall, and E. B. White wrote this:

"Armed with a diagram and clipboard, Catherine got into a shabby old raincoat, much too long for her, and put on a little wool hat, and proceeded to sit in the director's chair at the edge of her garden plot. There she sat hour after hour, with the wind and the weather, ready for the intricate planting of her bulbs and seeds. There was something comical, yet touching in her bedraggled appearance on this awesome occasion. For this small, hunched-over figure was absorbed in the implausible notion that there would be for her another spring, seemingly oblivious to the ending of her days, which she knew perfectly well was near at hand. But," he wrote, "there she sat, with her chart under those dark skies in the dying October day, calmly plotting the resurrection."

That vignette for me is an extraordinary picture of hope, a death-defying, resurrection-based hope. And it is that hope and that joy, so defiant and so embracing of life's goodness and possibilities, which is what this day dares to proclaim amidst the harsh facts and profound challenges of our age and in our own lives.

Let me close with this Easter story told by Tony Campolo after he attended worship in an African-American church in west Philadelphia, a story that contains this day's defiant joy and defiant hope.

"For an hour and a half the minister preached one line over and over again, standing that crowd of worshipers on its ear. That line was, 'It's Friday, but Sunday's coming!' That statement may not blow you away," Campolo writes, "but you should have heard him do it. He started out real softly, by saying, 'It was Friday, and Jesus was dead on a tree. But that was Friday, and Sunday's coming.' One of the worshipers yelled, 'Preach, brother!' And it was all the encouragement he needed.

He came on louder as he said, 'It was Friday, and Mary is crying her eyes out. The disciples were running in every direction like a sheep without a shepherd. But that was Friday, and Sunday's coming!' The preacher kept going. 'It was Friday. The cynics were looking at the world and saying, 'As things have been so shall they ever be. You can't change anything in the world.'

But those cynics didn't know that it was only Friday ... Sunday's coming.

It was Friday, and on Friday Pilate thought he had washed his hands of a whole lot of trouble. The Pharisees were strutting around and poking each other in the ribs. They thought they were back in charge of things. But they didn't know that it was only Friday! Sunday's coming! By the time the preacher had come to the end of his message," Campolo concludes, "I was exhausted. He had me so worked up that I couldn't have stood it much longer. At the end of his message, he just yelled at the top of his lungs, 'It's Friday!' And all 500 of us in that church rose to our feet as one, and we shouted back, 'But Sunday's coming!'"

Well, my friends, Sunday has arrived! Which means that it is time for all of us to celebrate our defiant joy and hope. It's time for you and me to practice resurrection!

Let us pray: Lord, with those women long ago, we are being told on this Easter morning that the Lord is not in the tomb, that he is alive and that he goes before us in the land of the living, in Galilee, in those ordinary places in our everyday world where your life-giving, death-defying love is needed. May we share and celebrate such love in personal, powerful ways as we embrace the art of practicing resurrection, even today; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.