

Frighteningly Alive: The Resurrection

Good morning to you on this special day. It has often been said that without the Resurrection, there is no Christian faith. I think this statement is true. Somehow, beyond our understanding, God raises Jesus from death to life. And by participating in his death, we too share in his eternal life. And some form of agreement with this account is essential.

A person cannot follow Jesus for long without realizing that following him involves being opened up to the possibility that life is spectacularly unbounded; and that the life he wants for us, goes beyond anything we have yet comprehended; greater than any box we try to put it in.

The story of his resurrection forces us to consider that our lives are not simply boxed in and finite, with death hemming us in on every side and closing off all further possibility. By telling us that Jesus has been raised from death to life, the Gospels are making the claim that, when we live in Christ, we participate in a life that has no limits other than our own lack of faith or inability to see and hear.

A Terrifying Discovery

And interestingly enough the initial human response to the resurrection is terror! The only response to the empty tomb in Mark's Gospel is a report that the women fled from it in terror. Matthew's Gospel describes earthquakes that mirror how shaken Jesus's followers are when they discover that the tomb is empty. And this morning's account in Luke, although it feels a bit more like matter of fact reporting, also describes the women as perplexed and then terrified by what they suddenly begin to realize as they stand listening to the figures in white in the empty tomb.

The reason I think Jesus's followers were terrified, is because it completely overturned what must have seemed to them to be a final conclusion about life. Jesus's death by crucifixion, must have been like the final nail in the coffin of their hopes; a confirmation that life is finite and boxed in after all; that nothing beyond what we think is possible can really happen and that the predatory behavior that they saw governing the world was what has always been and will always be.

And from that point of view, the promise of heaven and the resurrection of which Jesus spoke must really only be pipe dreams,

words which he spoke to them to help them feel better; an “idle tale” to mask the despairing knowledge that death would have the last word.

And so, the sudden recognition that the resurrection of which Jesus spoke could be the reality was terrifying. It completely upended the sad conclusions about life they had finally and painfully come to accept.

I would imagine that, when they were confronted by the resurrection, they might have been like zoo animals who’s confinement has finally convinced them that the wild landscape which they long to inhabit must be an illusion. They pace broken-heartedly back and forth in their cages.

But then when suddenly they are taken out to the wild and the doors of their cages are flung open, they remain in their cages cowering in fear and bewilderment, unable to comprehend that the freedom their souls have longed for is really now an open possibility that they only need step into.

I think we are like that too. Our disappointments in life and our skepticism about what is possible, become our cages; our tombs. And we grow used to pacing back and forth inside them, broken-hearted, as

though the grooves worn into the ground by our pacing are the only course left to us.

Some Dog Psychology

You know, when I think of my dog, she very much reminds me of me, because she lives in a world of limited understanding, just as I do. She likes predictability, and she likes to bury her head in my side, because it makes her feel safe. She wants to be with Sheryl and myself all the time, because we are her life and she is afraid of a being hurt by a larger world that overwhelms her understanding.

At the same time, it is a joy to take her out hiking on the trail, especially to places where no-one is around and she can run off the leash. She loves to explore the wild in a way that is so free and full of life, splashing into streams, chasing squirrels and running up boulders to stare out over the horizon. And we have noticed that each time her fear and caution is replaced by a little bit more confidence and her horizons and abilities are noticeably expanded.

And all the while, we remain near enough that she can check to make sure we are there. On the trail she is living a life in which she is free to

grow, and yet we are always there as the presence that she needs to give her confidence.

I think that this is not so different from the relationship we have with God. The prospect of going forth out of our boxes is too terrifying to handle without God's presence. But with God's presence, although it may still be terrifying, we go forth armed with a confidence that turns our journey into the unknown into an adventure; a source of growth and wholeness, rather than just a frightening ordeal.

Look for Him Among the Living: An Unfolding Revelation

I think that Luke's version of the Resurrection story is very encouraging in this way, because the words, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" He is not here, but has risen." are like words that urge to us to come out of the boxes we have put ourselves in. They urge us to get out there on the trail of life, with the promise that Jesus will be present with us there, always walking with us to give us confidence in the face of the unknown.

In our case, as we emerge from the pandemic, we are literally being called out of our tombs, from the four walls of isolation within which

we have internalized the “hunker down” covid mentality as a “new normal.” We are being called not to linger in the conclusion that our lives are defined or limited by “covid flavored” thoughts of death.

The question “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” Is also Luke’s way of letting us know that Jesus’s living presence continues to unfold and that he will be there for us too, as we venture forth into the post-covid world.

And what does God say to us about the landscape that we are going forth to encounter?

In the words of Isaiah, God has come to create “a new heaven and a new earth, where “even the wolf and the lamb will eat together, and the lion eat straw with the ox.” Again, we are challenged to have faith in a reality that seems to defy our experience. Will we say that this vision of the greatest good is impossible? Will we call it an “idle tale” and remain confined in our prisons of skepticism? Or will we say “amen” and give our hearts to the Resurrection Spirit, in which there are literally no limits to what can unfold in the goodness of God?

Again and again, we succumb to the conclusion that we are imprisoned in a world bounded on every side by the powers of death, and again and again we are called to open our hearts and minds to the promise of a life that seems too good to be possible.