“An Easter Person”

A sermon by the Rev. Rachel Wildman for Easter 3, 2018

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church

As a young adult, I was more of a Christmas person. I related to and proclaimed the incarnation—God-with-us as a vulnerable infant. I proclaimed Jesus’ *life*—Jesus’ healings of people’s minds and bodies such that these formerly ostracized and isolated people were returned to the fold of their communities—Jesus’ condemnation of greed and oppression—Jesus’ feedings and Jesus’ teachings, that God’s love upends the world—the last become first and the first, last.

I was not so much an Easter person. Of course, I celebrated Easter. But I didn’t relate easily to, or proclaim nearly as authentically, Resurrection.

In all of the resurrection stories in the Gospels, doubt is a prominent feature. Last week, in John’s Gospel, we met again good ol’ doubting Thomas who simply cannot believe until he has touched Jesus for himself. Today, although none of the disciples voice their doubt out loud, it’s there, and Jesus invites them to touch him…he eats fish to prove that he’s real. In today’s Gospel we have the marvelous line “while they were in their joy, they were disbelieving..” Mark Davis, an academic who pours over the greek translations we use, suggests that in the greek it is actually more like “disbelieving from their joy.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The intensity of the joy, itself, leads to disbelief. Try to unpack that one.

To proclaim resurrection, is most certainly, to proclaim the unarguable reality of doubt. But the presence of doubt in the experience of resurrection is not why I was not an Easter person. I was *not* a person of certitude—quite the opposite. Proclaiming doubt was the *comfortable* part of resurrection for me.

But to fully proclaim resurrection, one can’t just proclaim doubt. One can’t even just proclaim life. To fully proclaim resurrection, one must also proclaim Jesus’ death, *and* the suffering he experienced prior to it. To be an Easter people is to proclaim Resurrection—*New* life—not in some vacuum of pure joy, but in *doubting* joy, and in grief, and abandonment, and confusion, and fear.

*‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”*

This portion of Luke’s Gospel is called the commissioning, though with our 21st century ears, it’s pretty darn hard to tell. Jesus doesn’t seem to tell the disciples to *do* anything. He says simply, “You are witnesses of these things.” The key word to the early Christian church that signifies that this is a directive, is the word witnesses. To be a witness in those days was not primarily as we use the word witness today—a passive observer. To be a witness in the days of the early church was to allow one’s life and actions to testify to the worth, and the effect, of something.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Luke’s community understood Christ’s parting instructions to be to allow their lives, and their actions, to demonstrate the worth of Jesus’ suffering and rising from the dead, and the worth of the fact that after that, Jesus called for repentance and forgiveness, perhaps rather than for condemnation and retribution. They are not asked to witness to Jesus’ life—to Jesus’ miraculous healings and alteractions with the political powerholders, though I am sure they are welcome to. What they are specifically commissioned to, is to witness to Jesus’ suffering and yet, rising again in the face of doubt and fear and grief and hopelessness, proclaiming, of all things, forgiveness.

This part, this was the the uncomfortable part of Resurrection for me. Faith communities that focused on suffering, proclaimed suffering, and then proclaimed miraculous rising again, never mind the “R” word—Repentence…they were communities within which many I knew had experienced pain or fear. I worried about the effects of being passionate about suffering, death, and being *raised from the dead.*

And yet, just as Christ’s first disciples, in every hearing of this Gospel, I—we--too, are commissioned as *witnesses* of these same things. And so, we are compelled to at least ask ourselves, what *is* the worth in Jesus’ suffering and rising again three days later?

What is important to *you* about the fact that Jesus suffered, died, and then rose again, proclaiming forgiveness? How does that influence your life? How does that impact the way you act in the world?

PAUSE

As a person formed in thinking most about how Christ’s *life* matters to me, it took awhile as an adult before I had an authentic answer about why Christ’s *suffering, death* and resurrection matter to me.

Christ’s suffering and rising have invaluable worth *to me* because they teach me that suffering is not the last word—they show me that precisely in the midst of the grief, doubt, confusion, and the fear that this time, we really may have been abandoned, that often accompany suffering and both literal and figurative death, new life *can* rise—*new* because it takes on a form we may not recognize, and *life* because it is grounded in profound forgiveness.

To witness to Christ’s suffering and rising is not just to think these things to have worth, though. To truly be an Easter person commissioned by the risen Christ, which I *now* am, is to allow the immense worth of these things to affect my actions. They must. And they do.

PAUSE

Let me give you a few examples.

Contemplating the possibility that I would not be chosen for ordination to the priesthood, it was not Jesus’ miracles that I clung to—his ability to change reality—water to wine—“not ordination material” to “ordination most definitely!”—it was not even his authority to “stick it to the religious establishment,” which those determining my oridnation propects could sometimes seem an awful lot like.

What sustained me was the Easter truth that were I not to be chosen, God would provide me with some form of new life even in the midst of the grief and confusion that I would surely be feeling.

Similarly, sitting alongside any of you who find yourselves in the midst of illness or grief, who face your own deaths, who have been overtaken by the tidal wave of addiction again and again and again, it is not Jesus’ life I want to tell you about—it is not his miraculous healings, or the little girl he raised from the dead, or the 5,000 people he fed from just a few loaves and fishes. It is not some assurance that he will swoop in and cure you.

What I want to tell you about is the personal way he knows fear, grief and physical pain; the shaking of the heavens and the earth at his death; the awe and, yes, *disbelieving* joy in those who met his risen self; or the invitation to come back home to God, and to be bathed in forgiveness.

To be a Christmas person is to risk witnessing a hope that is grounded only in the miraculous. To be an Easter person—an Easter people-- is to allow both the incarnation and the resurrection to have worth—to characterize our actions and reactions—to not only burst forth with the power of Jesus’ life, but also to warmly cradle fear and doubt as we wait together for new life.

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AMEN.

1. From Mark Davis’ blog Left Behind and Loving it, Accessed 4/12/18 at: <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary on The Gospel of Luke, accessed online through the *Ministry Matters* Website, 4/12/18 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)