

To Be Reconciled: A Journey Through Lent EASTER SUNDAY

“A New Way to Live”
(Acts 10:34-43)

Dan Collison
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Introduction

1. Easter is the most important, highly anticipated, and celebrated moment in the Christian faith movement. Today, around the world, millions of people are celebrating the resurrection of Jesus with pageantry, mass gatherings, orchestras, and choirs. And, rightly so! The first Easter was the epicenter of God’s redefinition of the human experience. People and religions before Christ related to God largely on the basis of codes, merit systems, and blood sacrifice to atone for sin. In Jesus’ death and resurrection the human experience was reoriented for all time to be about sustained relationship between people and God on the basis of faith, hope, and love, with the greatest being love.

Having covered all of the essentials, I could stop right there and declare this the shortest Easter sermon of all time!

Given the magnanimity of today’s global Easter proceedings I have to admit, that when the First Covenant creative team spent several meetings talking about innovative ways to plan Easter through the reconciliation lenses of “power under,” “seeing the resurrection in the small things,” drums circles with trash cans and coffee cans filled with nuts and bolts...and artwork that “is a quiet reflection of a simple yet profound poem that finds the extraordinary in the most un-extraordinary, overlooked places.”...I thought to myself “easy for you to be artsy and eclectic! But, in a society where Easter is presented with great triumph and flash, I have a real sermon challenge in front of me!”

2. Then again, I do have good material to work with because First Covenant’s journey through Lent laid a meaningful foundation in this regard. Our teachings explored the ways Christ helps us to see one another more generously despite our differences. And, we talked about finding confidence not in our pursuit of perfection, but in God’s acceptance of our limitations and pursuit of our affection. We came to grips with the way God incarnated in Jesus is the epitome of “power coming from below” and the model for us to understand God’s love for and identification with our humanity so we would always remember that power is made perfect through weakness, not in spite of weakness.

The entire month of March has been more about looking for ways that the resurrected Christ changes how we see ourselves and one another in our day-to-day lives and less about building a perfect theological Easter construct. So, I shouldn’t have been surprised by the poem the visual artists chose as inspiration for Holy Week. “Yellow” by Mary Oliver is a poem that has only 22 words:

“Yellow”

There is a heaven we enter
through institutional grace
and there are the yellow finches bathing and singing
in the lowly puddle.

-Mary Oliver, *Evidence*

3. I have wrestled much with this poem throughout Holy Week because a part of me expects more of a “Lord of the Rings” kind of Easter than a “finches playing in puddles” kind of Easter. A “battle of good over evil” kind of Easter, not an “evidence of grace in all that is around us” kind of Easter. Reflecting on my wrestling, I did have the thought that Easter had sort of fallen into a bit of a rut for me. Over the nearly five decades of my life Easter, with its pageantry and processions, has always had a Western Civilization Greco-Roman triumphal feel to it. Which, isn’t all bad but, when you think about it, isn’t the only way to celebrate the power and triumph of Jesus’ resurrection. In fact, the origins of the Christian movement point in a different direction entirely.
4. I am working my way through an audio course titled, “Foundations of Western Civilization”¹ that covers the time period of 3,000 B.C. to 1600 A.D. Class #23 talks about the shift from B.C. to A.D. and the point at which Jesus enters the Western Civilization narrative. In the lecture the teacher points out that Jesus and his first followers came from, to use First Covenant’s artist Heather Albinson’s words, “un-extraordinary and overlooked” villages and towns. Bethlehem, Nazareth, Galilee, Judea—these places were not influential at all to the Greco-Roman narrative. They were truly considered on the margin of the Roman Empire sending a message to all of humanity that Christ is for everyone and places a special emphasis on the edge and bottom of society.

In the end, I gave myself over to the creative team’s wishes and crafted an Easter sermon highlighting the resurrection of Christ in the un-extraordinary as a means to move beyond Christ’s resurrection as merely a one time miracle to be proven, to seeing it as God’s manifestation of the wholeness that we are all meant to experience right now and for eternity.

5. Of the 22 words in the poem “Yellow,” the word “puddle” grabbed my imagination because water is one of the common classical elements alongside earth, wind, and air. 71% of the earth’s surface is water-covered.² 50-75% of the human body is water depending on your age and gender.³ You can make it three weeks without food, but few make it longer than three days without water.⁴ Water is common, and a basic necessity of life.

Water was also the element that Jesus interacted with in very unusual ways leading to an array of theological and formational discoveries that ground the resurrection in a truly lived experience.

¹ <http://www.thegreatcourses.com/courses/foundations-of-western-civilization.html>

² <http://water.usgs.gov/edu/earthhowmuch.html> (accessed 3-25-16)

³ <http://chemistry.about.com/od/waterchemistry/f/How-Much-Of-Your-Body-Is-Water.htm> (Accessed 3-25-16)

⁴ <http://www.livescience.com/32320-how-long-can-a-person-survive-without-water.html> (accessed 3-25-16)

A. Water As Touch Point of the Lived Experience

1. What do I mean? Well, for instance, the gospel biography of John makes mention of the element of water in twelve of his twenty-one chapters. And, in each instance, we are given an important idea about the new way that people of the resurrection should live.
 - In John chapter one we read of Jesus existing in the essence of God before our world was created, and then participating in the creation of all things including the moment where Jesus, as the Word of God, became en-fleshed, and 50-65% water just like you and me. And, in human form Jesus asked to be baptized in water by his cousin, John the baptizer alongside other ordinary people pursuing baptism as an outward sign of an inward commitment of obedience to God's leadership.
 - In John chapter two we read of a very curious account of Jesus being convinced by his mother that the wedding celebration they attended would be ruined if the wedding wine wasn't replenished. Reluctant at first, Jesus begins his ministry of miracles by turning water from the town's well into \$50 a bottle kind of wine!
 - Chapter three tells of a conversation between Jesus and a famed teacher named Nicodemus. Jesus told Nicodemus that you can't think your way into God's way of living, but rather you have to live your way into God's way of thinking through new spiritual birth that includes both our water-based humanness and our Spirit influenced souls.
 - Chapter four recounts a conversation with a Samaritan woman at a water well, in which Jesus breaks several cultural and religious rules to have a conversation and share water with the woman. In their exchange Jesus takes the Nicodemus theological innovation a step further by telling the woman that whoever believes in him will tap an inner God given *spiritual* wellspring that will satisfy their souls more than any relationship or material provision could ever hope to accomplish.
 - Chapter five tells us about the time Jesus walked by a pool surrounded by outcasts of society--people who were diseased and crippled, because it was rumored that the water from the pool healed the first one in when the water was stirred. Jesus healed a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years without him needing to touch the water. And, Jesus asked him to pick up his mat and walk, even though that direction broke a Sabbath religious rule.
 - Water must have a subversive quality, because whenever Jesus was near water the likelihood of Jesus breaking a religious rule or creating some theological innovation was always high! Like in John chapter six when Jesus walked three to four miles on the surface of water, defying gravity, to meet his disciples in a boat because they were straining at the oars hoping not to capsize in the middle of the night and in a storm. When Jesus said "It is I; don't be afraid" they became even more afraid--no longer of the storm, but of who Jesus might be.

- In John chapter thirteen Jesus, the God-human who healed and calmed bodies of water, took a towel and basin, and washed the filthy feet of his disciples telling them, “If I, the Lord, have washed your feet, you should also wash one another’s feet.” That moment may have been the most defining of all time—explicitly telling us that serving one another is the very best way to live. Imagine a world where this was THE way that people treated one another!
 - In John chapter nineteen we are told that Jesus was hanging on his cross of crucifixion, not blaming his crucifiers for their hatred of him, and dying of thirst. In a dramatic display of emptying he said “It. Is. Finished.” And, giving proof to his bodily death—Jesus’ side was pierced by a Roman spear releasing the water stores of his body onto the ground.
 - In John chapter twenty-one, after the resurrection, Peter, one of the original twelve selected disciples, jumps out of his fishing boat and runs to the shore to be with, and eat a meal and share drink with, the resurrected and re-hydrated Christ. The way the first disciples describe Jesus’s resurrected body is a mystery in every way---healed scars where nails had ripped his flesh, eating and drinking as a human, but coming and going from places in ways that defy rational explanation.
2. All of these touch points with common every day water reveal something about Jesus and the way he wants his followers to live, something about people and the travail we experience in life as we are confronted with grace, and something about the new ways we are to live if we truly believe in the resurrected Christ. This was no more evidenced than with Peter, who always seemed to be around when Jesus was near water. Perhaps, it was because he spent a great deal of his life on water. Peter was a fisherman by trade. He was doing commercial fishing when Jesus first invited him to become one of the twelve who travelled with him from town to town. Peter was the disciple, on the night of the boat crossing and the big storm, who was crazy enough to get out of the boat and walk to Jesus on the water.

Peter is an important part of the Easter story because he was as taken by surprise and afraid of events as much as any of us would have been, if we were in his shoes. His example to us is that, in the end, the resurrection was the key change agent that expanded his worldview.

B. The Resurrection As The Change Agent of Our Worldview

1. The book of Acts is the Bible’s historical accounting of some of the events of the Early Christian church after the resurrection of Christ. In chapter 10 of the book of Acts we are told of a time where Peter was staying with Simon the tanner, whose house was by the sea. It was there that Peter had a vision from God that challenged several assumptions from his religious tradition. Explicitly, the vision told him he was not to “call anything impure that God has made clean” including certain food and cultural exclusions. This was a major change to his traditional beliefs, and at stake was the very identity of the Christian movement.

When asked about the meaning of this vision, Peter said this to a group of listeners:

“I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism³⁵ but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.³⁷ You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

³⁹ “We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross,⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.⁴¹ He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Acts 10:34-43, NIV

2. This the personal testimony of a professional fisherman turned pastor and reformer theologian based upon what he experienced with the resurrected Jesus. It is critical that we recognize that Peter’s worldview went through a complete transformation and he began to see everyone and everything in more generous terms. And, that is our Easter invitation as well. We are invited to know Jesus as generous as he was, even if that generosity challenges our religious traditions of origin. We are invited to believe in Jesus, even if we were not among those who ate and drank with him following his resurrection.
3. As easy as such words roll out of my mouth during an Easter Sermon I fully recognize that this invitation is a stretch for some modern people. It could be because of the blatant failures of religious institutions or the sheer distance between some voices of the Christian faith movement and the identity of Jesus in the Bible—many modern people struggle to find Christian faith and the resurrection relevant to their day-to-day life. Or, maybe they find the moral teachings of Jesus relevant, but the claims of resurrection as too much to believe.

A few years back I was in a conversation with a really thoughtful person who does incredible work in the non-profit world. It was Holy Week and we had a brief conversation about the resurrection, and she said to me, “I firmly believe that Jesus lived and was a an incredible moral teacher. I just do not find the resurrection account credible or necessary in order to be a Christian.” The supernatural and extraordinary events of Jesus go beyond what most people of any age encounter in a lifetime. But, beyond the possibility that such things can happen, and have happened, what I find most compelling about the reality of the resurrection is the presence of the resurrection narrative in ordinary every day life, even in the tragedies of life, where resurrection, at first look, is the farthest from our imagination.

4. I have an example of what I mean.⁵ I recently listened to a podcast about a young family's journey of deep loss that was both gripping and relevant to the Easter narrative. To be clear, the couple comes from a Christian background, but their story was not framed in religious terms nor about Easter or resurrection. In fact, the family's story is framed in terms of the impact that the medical and research community had on them to help them re-imagine the value of every life as holding the power to regenerate and give life to others. I share a story like this--one that is not all wrapped up or framed in Christian religious terms--to help us see that the resurrection narrative can be found in even the most difficult of circumstances.
5. In 2009, Sarah Gray found out she'd be having twins they would eventually name Callum and Thomas. It was four more weeks before it was discovered that one of the twins wasn't going to survive. Thomas was diagnosed with anencephaly, a severed neural tube defect. Anencephaly means 'without a brain'.

Sarah remembers thinking, "I've done everything right. I don't smoke. I wasn't drinking. I eat healthy. I took vitamins." As the months went by, Sarah shopped for one set of clothes, one car seat and one stroller. All the while, she was picking out a coffin, and researching organ donation. When the babies were born, Ross and Sarah expected Thomas to die within minutes. Thomas lived for 5 days, and died at home, cradled in his parents' arms.

6. Over a year of grief counseling Sarah and Ross met people going through similar experiences. Some spoke about how they had saved lives by donating their loved ones' organs. Thomas' organs weren't big enough for transplant, and had gone to scientific research. Sarah began to wonder where Thomas' donations went, and whether they were put to use. She learned that one of the donations, his eyes, went to the Schepens Eye Research Institute at Harvard. She visited the Eye Institute and apparently the lab had never had a donor come visit before.

The doctor said that infant eyes are the most rare. "He said that Thomas' eyes are like gold to them," because they can regenerate for years. Looking back, Sarah says that that meeting gave her a sense of relief. "A feeling of... my son is OK," she says. "It almost felt like visiting our son at college." She bought a Harvard t-shirt.

A few months later the Grays went to the Duke Center for Human Genetics in Durham, N.C., where scientists found epigenetic differences in their cord blood, research that could one day help prevent Thomas' fatal defect, anencephaly. Sarah Gray bought a Duke t-shirt.

Their journey continued with a visit to Cytonet, a biotech company that had use their baby's liver in a trial to determine the best temperature to freeze liver tissues. Then on to multiple other locations where in every case the body of their child was catalyzing new discoveries over and over again, and Sarah bought a university t-shirt in every town.

There came a point in their journey where Sarah awakened to a completely different way of looking at life. Listen to the conclusion of the podcast.⁶

⁵ Adopted from the articles written by Emily Berman, and Michael Vitez. Full articles at: http://articles.philly.com/2015-03-30/news/60606995_1_cord-blood-liver-tissue-banks;
http://wamu.org/programs/metro_connection/13/02/01/coping_with_the_loss_of_a_newborn_child (accessed 3-25-16)

⁶ <http://www.radiolab.org/story/grays-donation/> (accessed 3-25-16)

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Manuscript of Audio Recording

...I started feeling that these were Thomas' colleagues and his co-workers and that he was a valuable partner in this important research that was being done.

And, I felt an even more fundamental shift. Almost like I had felt like I was a boat on an ocean that was rocky and choppy with waves. And, I had this feeling that I'm not the boat, I'm the ocean. Like, the decisions I make are changing other people. As opposed to just, "I am a boat getting slapped with waves all the time" it has made me feel powerful."

Conclusion

1. The angels who met the women at the tomb on the first Easter Sunday said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!"⁷ They said this because while suffering and death is a part of the life cycle, the Creator of all things was embodied in Jesus to show us that resurrection and life are the ultimate ends afforded to us now and for eternity. And, as little baby Thomas Gray's story tells us—even our DNA cries out for us to realize that our very lives are a gift from God, and we are given the gift of life to bring new life to others.
2. The resurrection of Christ is more than a one-time miracle to be proven. It is everywhere and is a manifestation of the wholeness that God meant for us to experience now and for eternity. And, when we, through the joy of believing and receiving forgiveness and new life, are immersed in the expansiveness of the resurrected Christ—our small lives, as small as baby Thomas Gray, or even as seemingly insignificant as yellow finches playing in a puddle—Our lives become embedded in a narrative much larger than ourselves. And, like the revelation that Sara Gray had about not being a boat tossed, but rather being one with the ocean, we will feel the powerful oceanic like strength of God's Spirit coursing through our veins and bringing resurrection to our lives every day.

⁷ Luke 24:1-6.

Prayer

God, Creator of all things, Jesus Christ God's Son who reconciles all things, and Holy Spirit who sustains all things, God-three in One--awaken our day to day lives and the un-extraordinary aspects of our experiences to the power of the resurrection that is present everywhere, whether we see it or not. We desire to believe in, and know Christ and become like Christ, and experience the joy of Christ' resurrection now and for eternity. We desire to immerse our lives in you such that we become a part of the waves of your mighty ocean of being that includes and transcends all that we know now and for eternity.

In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Benediction

As the new week begins and Easter sends us into the future—may we think of Christ's resurrection as more than merely a one-time miracle to be proven, but rather God's manifestation of the wholeness that we are all meant to experience right now and for eternity.

Amen! Go in peace.