

Sermon Discussion Information

Sermon Series: "To Be Reconciled: A Journey Through Lent"

Sermon Title: "A New Way to Live"

Sermon Text: Acts 10:34-43

Listener's Journey: I want my listener to think of Christ's resurrection as more than merely a one-time miracle to be proven, but rather as God's manifestation of the wholeness that we are all meant to experience right now and for eternity.

Unique Quotes from Sermon:

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!"

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*

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.

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.

This (The Scripture for the day) 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.

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.

Three Discussion Questions:

1. What has been the shape of Easter celebrations in your past? (Personal sharing)
2. Of all the Scripture and illustrations in the sermon, what means the most to you, or what was most provocative? (Exploring the text)
3. Where do you think the resurrection narrative exists in your day-to-day life, but you have yet to discover it? (Direct application)

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