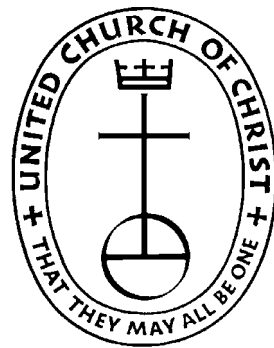


Easter Meditations

A Sermon By —
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and
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Two First Church ministers share their views of
the true meaning of the Easter stories.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

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The Resurrection of a Vision

Biblical scholar Marcus Borg said, “My understanding of Easter has changed significantly over my lifetime. I hear the Easter stories in a new way. As a child, I heard them as literally true, historically factual.” But Borg doesn’t hear them that way anymore, nor do I. For me, the Easter stories are not about historical facts. They are myths – myths that can still be vessels of truth. For me, the resurrection stories are not about the resurrection of Jesus’ body. Rather they are about the resurrection of his vision.

In the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Joel speaks of a new day:

You will know that I am present in Israel, that I and no other am your God and my people will never again be put to shame. After this I shall pour out my spirit on all humanity; your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old ones will dream dreams and your young ones see visions.

I don’t think the references to young and old were about chronological age; I think Joel was saying that those old in spirit dream the dreams of nostalgia, looking backward, yearning for the way things used to be.

But those young in spirit see visions of the future, of what might be, of new possibilities. Jesus’ ministry was about his vision of what he called the Empire of God.

Jesus became a new Moses for those who joined his effort to reform the Judaism of his day and to challenge Rome’s oppression, freeing them from that which held them in bondage.

Jesus the healer brought comfort to those in pain. Jesus the teacher opened people’s minds to new ways of understanding life and experiencing God. Jesus the host at an open table welcomed everyone into his company. Jesus the embodiment of mercy gave new expression to God’s compassion and forgiveness. Jesus the social prophet became the voice of the voiceless and friend of the outcast.

All of that came together in his vision of an Empire of God which was an alternative to the violence, greed and inhumanity of Rome. An Empire of God built on love, mercy and peace. An empire immediately available – not off in the heavens, not something after death, but found amidst daily life.

His followers believed in that vision. Some of them gave up all that they had to be part of his movement for change.

But then everything fell apart.

Jesus carried that vision beyond the obscurity of small Galilean villages to Jerusalem, the heart

of Roman control in Israel. He not only taught about that vision, but he brought it to life in ways Rome couldn't avoid – a clearly staged political demonstration as he entered the city and then dramatic civil disobedience in the temple courtyard. So Rome crucified him for sedition.

Disciples of Christ theologian Rita Nakashima Brock recently wrote: “The Roman Empire used crucifixion against non-citizens, the under-classes and slaves. It was regarded as so shameful that even families of victims would not speak of it. It required no trial and was more akin to a lynching than a formal execution. It began with horrible forms of torture. The victim was left hanging naked and exposed to the elements. Bodies were left to rot and be eaten as carrion until nothing was left to bury. Crucifixion was designed to destroy an entire existence, so that even the names of the crucified were erased from memory.”

That's what happened to Jesus and his vision – an entire existence destroyed in a humiliating death. For Jesus followers, the dream became a nightmare. So what did they do?

In the Gospel of Peter, a collection of ancient fragments found by archaeologists in the late 19th century, Peter said:

We twelve disciples of Jesus, continued to weep and mourn. All of us, still grieving on account of what happened, left for our own homes. I, Simon Peter and Andrew my brother, took our fishing nets and went away to the sea.”

They went home, grieving, humiliated, embarrassed – the vision was dead.

Now before I continue about Jesus' followers, let me tell you a modern story. Jeffrey Lockwood, a professor at the University of Wyoming, wrote about his daughter's pet, a white dwarf hamster the size of a ping-pong ball. He said that Snowball was intelligent and affectionate. She loved being out of her cage, hiding in Erin's pocket or rambling through a Hamsterville that Erin constructed out of blocks.

The problem was how to get her from her nest into a world where she could find the adventure she relished. She was afraid to leave her familiar territory. Erin could have forced her, but that would have broken her spirit.

Instead Erin discovered that Snowball would readily dash into a toilet paper tube placed on the floor of her cage. Erin would then lift the tube out of the cage and Snowball would walk out onto her waiting hand. The tube had become the hamster's bridge from the cage into the world.

The Book of Acts tells us that a couple months after Jesus' execution some 150 disciples, men and women, gathered in Jerusalem to talk about ways to keep Jesus' message alive. Peter courageously preached in public about Jesus' vision of the Empire of God. Peter and James, the brother of Jesus, began a faith community built around Jesus' memory.

What happened? What got Peter and the others to leave the security of their homes in the Galilee in order to create a new movement to keep Jesus' vision alive? What paper tube or bridge carried

them into this new life?

Listen to some speculation by Episcopal Bishop Jack Spong: “Conflicting thoughts about Jesus preoccupied Peter. He yearned to put Jesus’ ideas behind him, to get on with his life... But he had drunk too deeply from this fountain of living water. He wrestled, day after day, until suddenly it came together. The crucifixion was Jesus’ ultimate parable, demonstrating that in giving love away we find love; in embracing the outcast we are embraced.

“Peter suddenly felt himself embraced even with his doubts, fears and denials. He felt resurrected. The clouds of grief and depression vanished; in that moment, he sensed Jesus alive.”

You see, the real resurrection had nothing to do with Jesus’ body – it had to do with the resurrection of hope among his disciples; with the resurrection of Jesus’ vision of new possibilities.

That’s what I think Easter should be about for us – a resurrection of our hope.

Sometimes we feel locked into a tomb by grief due to the death of one we have loved, to the end of a marriage or relationship, to the loss of meaningful work, or the loss of ability due to aging. But a sense of God’s love revealed by Jesus and lived out in a caring community of faith enables us to push aside the stone of grief and to emerge into hope for new life.

Sometimes we are locked into tombs of anger about injustice in the workplace, infidelity by one we love, waste of talent and opportunity by a child. Again, trust in Jesus’ vision can help us roll that stone of anger away.

Sometimes when we don’t live up to our expectations for ourselves or when we hurt others, we are entombed by regret or guilt. But Jesus’ living vision of forgiveness helps roll the stone of our own guilt away.

The vision of Jesus also lives on as we help open tombs that enclose others. When we reach out to the people of Haiti and Chile, when we seek freedom for those living in Occupied Palestine, when we work for peace, Jesus’ vision helps us roll away stones of despair.

When we reach out to the poor, to the homeless, to the abused, to immigrants – Jesus’ vision helps us roll away stones of hopelessness.

When we work to combat racism, sexism, homophobia and prejudice, when we seek marriage equality for all, Jesus’ vision of radical hospitality rolls away stones of bigotry.

Biblical scholar Steve Patterson said, “Resurrection is not about the resuscitation of a corpse; it is about the resuscitation of hope in the face of cruel realities. Resurrection is about the resuscitation of hope that there is indeed a God who loves us beyond our furthest imaginings.”

That’s what Easter means to me.

EASTER PRAYER (adapted from one by Kathleen Rolenz)

Spirit of life, we come this Easter morning rejoicing in the ongoing song of life and hope that is within us and around us.

In this season of renewal, of life bursting into bloom or song, the hidden beauty of nature preparing to unfold, remind us that we too have a hidden inner beauty, reflecting the image of your creative power.

Yet we often question our talent, our beauty, our abilities, our value. We become cynical about love; jaded about peace, less hopeful about the future. We roll stones across entrances; build fences instead of gates; close fists instead of open arms.

Spirit of Resurrection, remind us of the power of hope to triumph over fear, the power of love to prevail over the horrors of hate, the potential for peace to be victorious over hostility.

Spirit of life, as we feel you flowing and pulsing within, we pray for a courageous and joyous faith,

- empowering us to become our finest and truest selves,
- empowering us to see your image in our brothers and sisters,
- empowering us to participate with you in the creation of a new time of life, in which love, justice, beauty and peace are abundantly available to all.

For this we pray. Amen.

In the Breaking of the Bread

Luke 24

By the Rev. Libby Tigner

Some of my favorite classes when I was in college were my psychology classes. I loved studying about the formation of self, about how we learn, about how we perceive reality, how we differentiate ourselves from our surroundings, about how we think memory works.

I benefitted tremendously from several years of work with a psychotherapist, a woman with an advanced degree in psychology, who helped me to find tools to create strong personal boundaries, to deal effectively with my emotions, and to have realistic expectations of myself and others. I thought very seriously about studying psychology and becoming a therapist. When I first decided to go to seminary, my plan was to become a pastoral counselor.

But when I returned to school to finish an undergraduate degree so that I could go to seminary, I majored in sociology. I learned how we are all products of our social and historical location, and that we are conditioned by the context of the social network in which we live. Once in seminary, in my classes in contextual ministry, religious education and theology, I became more and more convinced of the importance of understanding the human primarily as a social being.

But even more than therapy, or classes in sociology, or ministry, or theology, it is my lived experiences of grace that convince me, over and over again, that the most important part of being human is being in relationship, is living in community with other people.

On my own, I can be deeply moved by a beautiful mountain vista, or awed by the sight and sounds of waves crashing on the shore, or experience the presence of the divine in prayer or meditation. For many people, those personal experiences of the sacred are what are most important and most sustaining. But that is not my experience.

For me, the times when I am most moved, most humbled, most gratified, the times when I most learn what it truly means to be human are all times when I have connected with someone else.

The place of community at the very heart of our Christian experience is exemplified in the text that I have chosen for this morning. It is my favorite resurrection story, and it is found in the 24th chapter of Luke. It is the story of the road to Emmaus. It takes place on Easter Sunday, after the first reports of an empty tomb have gotten back to Jesus' followers. Listen as I read it.

That same day, two of the disciples were making their way to a village called Emmaus – which was about seven miles from Jerusalem – discussing all that had happened as they went.

While they were discussing these things, Jesus approached and began to walk along with them, though they were kept from recognizing Jesus, who asked them, “What are you two discussing as you go on your way?”

They stopped and looked sad. One of them asked him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who doesn't know the things that have happened these past few days?"

Jesus said to them, "What things?"

They said, "About Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet powerful in word and deed in the eyes of God and all the people, and how he was condemned to death and was crucified. Besides this, today, some women of our group have just brought us some astonishing news. They were at the tomb before dawn, and didn't find the body; they returned and informed us that they had seen a vision of angels, who declared that Jesus was alive. Some of our number went to the tomb and found it to be just as the women said, but they didn't find Jesus."

Then Jesus said to them, "Didn't the Messiah have to undergo all this?" Then, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted the scripture for them.

By now they were near the village they were going to, and Jesus appeared to be going further. But they said, "Stay with us. It's nearly evening – the day is practically over." So Jesus went in and stayed with them.

After sitting down with them to eat, Jesus took bread, and said the blessing, then broke the bread and began to distribute it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus, who immediately vanished from their sight.

They got up immediately and returned to Jerusalem, where they found the Eleven and the rest of the company assembled. The travelers recounted what had happened on the road, and how they had come to know Jesus in the breaking of the bread.

In this story, these friends of Jesus didn't recognize him as they were walking and talking. They didn't recognize him when he was explaining scripture to him. They recognized Jesus when they sat down at a meal and broke bread together. When they shared in that most basic act of being human, that universal act of hospitality – eating together – they realized that Jesus was among them.

Table fellowship. Communion. Hospitality. Sharing the basic stuff of life. Whatever we call it, this story says to me that the teachings of Jesus come alive to us, are made known to us when we engage each other as human beings.

That is certainly how I have experienced God's grace, how I have experienced forgiveness, how I have found resurrected living is possible – in relationship, in community.

When I have hurt someone and have found the courage to acknowledge the damage I have done and have asked for forgiveness, I experience God's grace. When someone comes to me and says they are sorry, if I am able to find the humility to forgive, I encounter God. When I rub up against the needs of someone else, and find that we can't always, each of us, get everything that we want, I learn to regard another person's needs instead of only my own, and I and learn more about sharing and generosity. When I take the time to really listen to someone else's story, both my world and my heart

grow to be a little bit bigger, and I learn something more about the wideness of God's love and mercy. I think I might be an okay human on my own. But I get the opportunity to become a better human in relationship with others.

This is part of the beauty of the Easter story for me – that God's loving, redeeming, gracious presence is made known to us, in the breaking of the bread – the daily acts of caring and being together in a supporting and loving community. Let us pray:

Holy One, in our stories of your love we learn to be our best selves. May we find the courage that we need to live each day with integrity, with purpose, committed to the wellbeing of one another, and as the embodiment of your love and grace. In this Easter season, may we learn to live as those whose lives have been resurrected from the fears, the worries, the guilt, the shame that have left us living in the tombs of our own making. May we, through your grace, step into the promise of each new day, emboldened and empowered, truly living as your resurrection people. We offer this prayer in the name of your spirit of love. Amen.