

Easter Sermon, March 23, 2008

San Dimas Community Church, UCC

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When I begin to write a sermon I almost always start by thinking about *you*, the congregation. I ask myself what word might be helpful and I try to imagine the place where you are coming from as you enter worship. So preaching on Easter is especially challenging because I know that people come with many different expectations of what they need and long to hear. These yearnings may not be clearly defined in words, but they are there. I know some of the *resurrection stories* you long to hear, but I do not know them all. Today as we end the season of Lent, that time of self-reflection, and after we've faced the deafening silence of the cross, we acknowledge that God's story does not end in silence but moves forward to resounding joy.

My husband joined the Carleton College choir his senior year because he heard they were to sing Bach's B-Minor Mass, and although he CAN sing it, he can't talk about it without getting emotional so I ask him to write a description of it. In Tom's own words:

One of the most important moments in the Mass is the transition between two movements in its central Credo (the "I believe") section, in which Bach sets the Nicene Creed to music. The "Crucifixus" movement in this section begins with a sinking theme in E minor, in dirge-like 3/2 time. "He was crucified," the choir sings in interweaving melodies over a repeating bass line that descends endlessly in a chromatic scale; "he was crucified also for us, suffered under Pontius Pilate, and was buried." With the last phrase, the music backed by dark strings, sinks to almost a whisper, descending as if with Jesus into the silent grave, to a final chord at the very bottom of the singers' ranges. But strangely, that final chord is not the expected E minor chord, but rather a G major chord, making the resolution incomplete and unsettled.

What follows is a short rest, which one commentator has called "perhaps the most profound silence in the history of Western music." And then, the choir cries out "Et surrexit!" "And he was resurrected!" at very nearly the tops of their ranges, backed by trumpets and the full orchestra in a lively dance tempo, a great fugue of celebration: "And he was resurrected on the third day, in accordance to the scriptures!" In this moment, Bach captures beautifully and vividly in richly profound music not only the despair of the crucifixion and the unexpected wild joy of resurrection, but also the moment of silence between them, when the whole world pauses, looking to God.

Today, after the pause, we come looking to God for the joyous exultation of hope bound up in resurrection. Some of us come seeking resurrection in anticipation of seeing our beloved gone before us in death. For some resurrection is the life that appears once more in the spring when, as the Natalie Sleeth hymn says, **from the bulb there is a flower, in the seed, an apple tree, in cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!** Others, today, seek resurrection, new life from the depths of depression and despair that are beyond their control but within the power of God's love to give. Resurrection is the possibilities of new beginnings, the life that death cannot keep down. All these hopes and dreams we bring to Easter morn to be reaffirmed and realized.

Yet, resurrection joy does not always come on our time schedule. Justice is not always complete when we think it should be. Life is not always fair. This past Tuesday I was called to visit a young mother who delivered twin boys four months prematurely. Each baby was about the size of my hand and their feet smaller than my thumbnail. Their eyes not yet ready to see their world were covered in sterile gauze. Birth came too soon and now life is held in precarious balance. How do parents face such uncertainty on Tuesday when Easter is just a few days off?

And yet, today on Easter we are here as resurrection people to affirm, sing praise, give glory, to a love that sustains life and a love that knows no beginning or end. The gospel of John proclaims the *logos*, the *word* that was with God before the beginning, and that *word* is so much more than letters on a page. For the Hebrews *word* meant power, what was spoken came to be, *word* was the womb of creation. That divine power, that more than we can perceive as human beings, was not bound within the borders of the heavenly realm. That power descended in the *one* we know as Jesus who showed us in flesh and blood a power called love that was not dependent on the ebb and flow of the world we know.

The power of God's love in Christ is what some people have defined as *creative responsive love*. Now I know that sounds abstract, but think about it: *Creative*--evolving from the present to become more, the possibilities that the artist doesn't know will be and yet she or he gives themselves to the process and something beautiful becomes. *Responsive*--the artist does not ignore the subject, the idea, the other but embraces the other as she responds to it through beauty. And *love*--much more than love as we imagine it to be--a love that is wisdom, beyond time and space, a love that reaches the depth of soul and spirit that knows no beginning and no end. Resurrection is *creative responsive love* writ large. Resurrection is our belief that this world lives and breathes a love that ultimately is not thwarted by human activity or misgivings.

Resurrection was that which Jesus gave his life to. He knew God, he knew God so clearly that through the eyes of love, nothing could ultimately separate the living from the dead. Thus, the angel in Luke asks Mary as she peers into the empty tomb: "*why do you seek the living among the dead?*"

Mary was the first to whom Jesus appeared. The other disciples saw the empty tomb and ran home to think about it. After all, they were co-conspirators with Jesus and his movement; after his death, they ran off to hide fearing for their own lives. Mary was a disciple, too, yet she stays at the tomb, weeping, her sorrow caused her to stay regardless of any threat to her safety. Her love overshadowed fear. And in the depths of her sorrow, Jesus comes to her, and she recognizes him through the eyes of love. It is only that kind of love, allowing for a creative response, that brings ultimate resurrection joy. Mary has experienced the Christ of resurrection.

Now, I know that today is joy filled with worship, family time, and celebration; but tomorrow Monday comes. And yet, we need today; for it is these moments in which we connect with the unseen possibilities that give us hope and that sustain us. In this moment we gather together all the images of sight, sound, smell, and touch to affirm a life that is always calling us forward to a future that God alone can know. It is in these Easter moments that we touch the possibilities deeply embedded in every moment, and when we come to know no ordinary kind of love, a love that includes us and yet is beyond us. It is this love that makes us fully real.

One of my favorite children's stories is Margery William's The Velveteen Rabbit. In this story the Velveteen Rabbit asked the Skin Horse: "*What is real?*" *The Skin Horse replied, "Real is a thing that happens to you when someone loves you for a long, long time - not just to play with - but really loves you, then you become real. Generally - by the time you are real - most of your hair has been loved off and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But once you are real you can never become unreal again.* We believe that God's love revealed to us in Jesus Christ has made us real. And today with St. Paul, we celebrate with grateful hearts *that nothing, neither life nor death, powers or principalities, things present or things to come can separate us from that great love known to us in Christ Jesus.* This is our Alleluia and our Joy! Amen!