

Practice Resurrection

Homily by Rev. Emily Bruce

March 31, 2024 – Easter Sunday

First Parish Church, Kingston MA

The book of Luke, chapter 24 describes what happens at dawn, three days after Jesus has died. Verses 1-5 read as follows:

[On] the first day of the week, at early dawn, [the women] came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they went in, they did not find the body [of Jesus]. ⁴While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.’

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?” they say. You would forgive the women’s confusion. They laid him in the tomb three days ago, and rolled a very large, very heavy stone over its entrance. It’s a pretty safe assumption that, three days later, the body would still be there.

But the stone was rolled away. Unbeknownst to them, a resurrection had taken place. A transformation of self from one form into another. A rebirth that would change the course of history.

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The Easter story is a complex story that contains so much despair, and yet also teaches us about hope and the power of love. A man is crucified by the state for his resistance efforts, his speaking truth to power, his message of radical love and acceptance. He suffers cruelly before he finally dies.

And then, he is resurrected into new life, and in doing so he teaches his followers that love will triumph over hate, that the power of goodness and truth in this world cannot ultimately be suppressed.

Theologically, it can get really messy in the middle there, especially for those who preach that suffering is redemptive, those that hang the whole story on a God that requires death for forgiveness to be possible.

For the record, the God of my understanding doesn't work that way – the divine force of love and compassion that I stand up here talking about a lot doesn't demand pain in order to offer me grace. Doesn't require a payment of suffering in order for me to be transformed.

We humans do enough of that to ourselves and each other right here on earth.

I believe Jesus was put to death to make an example of what happens when you speak truth to power. Jesus was a scapegoat for those who saw him as a threat to the status quo. Jesus was countercultural, he dared to step outside of their boundaries and, by doing so, showed the rest of the world that another way was possible. That love, compassion and radical kindness could truly transform the entire world.

Historically – and still very much today – many of us don't like people who do that. We are challenged by those who speak out against the status quo, who dare to see themselves and the world differently, who demand a radical reorganization of our society. I say **us** here because I'm talking about all humanity.

We all have within us tremendous power to love and support each other, or to hate and fear each other. So it's important to recognize on this day when we're talking about death and resurrection, hatred and love, that we think about where we stand on this great spectrum. Do we use our power to support fear, distrust, division? Or do we use our power to empower resurrection – change and growth and transformation toward greater life?

In the midst of our broken world today, that is the promise that the Easter message can hold for all of us. And nowhere is this more salient for me than with our transgender family members and friends.

Today is Transgender Day of Visibility – held on March 31st every year to support and celebrate trans lives. So much of what we read and hear about trans lives is about their oppression, attempts to legislate them out of existence, and even to literally destroy them – so I find it beautiful and hopeful that there is a day created simply to celebrate them and their right to live their lives as their true selves.

And this Easter, I think our trans community *needs* a resurrection moment – they need a reminder that love transcends hate, that they deserve to be cherished and protected, that they can find hope in their bodies, minds and spirits – hope that can transcend this moment of injustice, resilience that can outlive the many threats that surrounds them.

Because their resurrection is painful. Their transformation is *hard*. Rev. Terri Echelbarger describes it this way: “Sometimes transformation is becoming more fully ourselves in a world that dearly wishes we wouldn’t. All transformation takes courage, but it’s a special kind of courage when the voices are urging us to go any direction but forward, and jeering [instead of] cheering our progress.”

In this way, I think of Jesus as the OG trans figure, who upended conventions, who dared people to think outside of carefully-drawn societal boundaries, who chose to befriend the outcasts and the rejected and offer them compassion, and who invited us to live into the power of resurrection in the midst of jeering and threat.

Because one of Jesus's teachings – that appears in all four Gospels – is that we must die in order to live. There are different interpretations of this teaching, and a lot of them have to do with the idea of letting go of what was in order to be transformed. Letting the old self die, so that we may more truthfully and authentically live. That is the kind of resurrection that the trans community is practicing every day.

Our whole lives – if we are paying enough attention – is series of deaths and rebirths, a procession of one way surrendering to another. Our childhood yields to adolescence, our adolescence to adulthood. Falling in love, falling out of love, marriage, children, divorce, career changes. And those are just the outwardly measurable transformations. What about our relationships – with our families, our friends – with ourselves?

What about the ways our beliefs change? What about the shifts in our faith – the ideals and tenets that we are loyal to? The philosophies and religious traditions that we choose to ground ourselves in? For so many of us, we have transformed our beliefs many times over the course of our lives. By what we've lived through, by the people and experiences that have changed us, the ways we have reframed how we see ourselves and our world. To be human is to be transformed, and so much of our suffering comes from denying the resurrections that life offers to us.

We are always in some place on the spectrum of dying and being reborn. We are always practicing resurrection – even if we don't realize it. This is where our hope lives and grows. Because resurrection is not a one-time event, but a process. It is a growing edge, as Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman calls it. He says "It is the extra breath from the exhausted lung, [it is] the upward reach of life when weariness closes in upon all endeavor, [it is] the source of confidence when worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash. Look well to the growing edge!"

When we lean into that growing edge, when we embrace practicing resurrection, we can better understand how necessary transformation is – for each of us, for our collective beloved community and for our world to survive.

This Easter, I invite you to consider how *you* are practicing resurrection – in your own life, your beliefs, and the ways you see and participate in our world. This Easter, may we embrace the Truth that Love will always win, but also know that it is up to us to participate in its resurrection. The pursuit of justice, truth and peace demand nothing less. May it be so, and amen.

