

Sermon Text – Sunday, March 31, 2024 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Isaiah 25:6-9; 2nd Reading: Mark 16:9-16

Scripture for Message: Acts 10:34-43 “Proclaim”

There are two important messages in our scripture readings today. First is the message of Jesus resurrection and with it a message of transformation. We read in Isaiah about God’s holy mountain on which the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast. We heard that the Lord of hosts will swallow up death forever, wiping away tears from all faces – on that day we will be transformed from a mournful people to a people of joy. “Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

This message of resurrection is not only for one day of the year, Easter Sunday. Every Sunday is a little Easter but today is THE day of resurrection. We should understand what that means to our lives. Not only our lives, but also what it means in the lives of countless others who receive “life after death” in the figurative sense. We hear in news reports of people wrongly accused and convicted of crimes. One young man, Korey Wise, at sixteen was tried as an adult and served thirteen years in prison for a crime he did not commit and was released only after another person confessed to the crime. When Wise reflects on those events and his life now he will tell you, “This is life after death. I always say that . . . There’s life after death.” That is how he sees his resurrection moment. In our reading from Acts we hear Peter speaking to the household of Cornelius a Roman Centurion, a Gentile. Peter has just heard Cornelius’ testimony about a vision he had that compelled him to send for Peter. Peter too had a vision that helped him to understand that no person could be considered impure or unclean, or day I say illegal. These were transformative moments for both Peter and Cornelius – resurrection moments. Moments that symbolize there is life after death.

Resurrection day, this day, is the culmination of the good news of Jesus Christ – all of the history in scripture lead us to this moment, but does that mean there is nothing that comes after? Consider that God is still in the business of resurrection – an ongoing gift God offers to us. This gift is our way of life in Christ Jesus, a gift of transformation, of renewal. God, through Jesus Christ makes us new everyday. What sin has rotted and age has atrophied, [God] will recreate. New and yet the same. God will bestow the fellowship of all the saints and the vision of God’s own face on his new creation. In a way we cannot begin to understand, God’s creative power conquers our decay and death through sin. Our faith is to overcome the evidence of our senses – we are to look on the utter destruction of death and see through to the miracle of resurrection.¹ Our

¹ Austin Farrer, “Physical Faith,” in *The End of Man* (London: SPCK, 1973), 15.

transformation comes when we have faith enough to accept this thing unseen and allow hope to flourish.

One thing we should consider on this Resurrection Sunday morning is how we should reflect on resurrection and its meaning in our lives. Not all of us have dramatic, transformative moments but there are some who face illness, struggles with addictions or who live with trouble coping day to day, some have relationship difficulties, some have financial problems that might overwhelm them. There may be someone sitting near you today who needs to experience 'life after death.' What does resurrection, life after death, look like for those people? We need to consider that because it is the basis for the second important message in our scripture readings today – testimony.

Hear now the good news of Easter. It spreads throughout the world. It began with Jesus' life, passion, and resurrection; it continued with those who witnessed the risen Christ; and now, it comes to us today, as we listen to God's word. Jesus says, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." Jesus commanded that we preach to the people and that we testify "that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

We should understand that the message is for everyone, not just some or not those who looked exactly like Jesus or those who only look like us – Jesus said preach the gospel to all creation. We should understand that God did this, God planned this, God set the whole thing up so that we might receive righteousness and salvation in Jesus' name. It is not up to us to decide who hears and who accepts God's message through Jesus – sometimes we are surprised at where the Gospel finds roots but it's not up to us. God shows no partiality but anyone who fears God, and does what is right is acceptable to God. It is important for us to understand that the reaches of God's grace are not walled off or controlled by human concerns, commitments, conventions, or categories. The goodness of God's grace is for all creation.

One thing we must understand from the story of Cornelius and Peter is that "we can keep our convictions about what is right and what is wrong for us to do. But we cannot let our convictions become a barrier to fellowship with believers with whom our convictions differ."² Peter found this out as his vision directed him to the home of Cornelius. Cornelius, a Roman Centurion was a God-fearer but not fully committed to follow Jesus. In his vision Cornelius received the message to send for Peter and listen to everything Peter would tell

² Lawrence O. Richards. *The 365 Day Devotional Commentary: Acts 10-11*. Chariot Victor Publishing. 1990. 838.

him about Jesus. Peter, being a devout Jew in addition to a follower of Jesus would never dream of entering the home of a Gentile, that would make him unclean. Peter would never allow anything unclean or impure enter his body or touch his person. Peter followed his religious convictions – and hesitated to commune with Cornelius. God sent a message to Peter in a vision, that nothing God created was impure or unclean and told him to wait for the men Cornelius would send and to go with them. Through their visions and their meeting both men were transformed and their convictions were challenged.

Jesus, through scripture, reminds us not to judge others, judgment is the prerogative of God not humanity. Some Christians will condemn smoking or alcohol use, some will condemn going to movies, playing cards, some even condemn dancing. Some churches, God forbid, will not even allow instrumental music during their worship services. Some protestants do not accept the Catholic faith as legitimate. Ironically, some Catholics do not accept Protestantism as authentic. I sometimes wonder if the kingdom of God were left to humanity to populate, wouldn't it indeed be a lonely place.

So what of our convictions, what do we allow as barriers to testimony and transformation? Peter and the others with him were astonished to realize that the holy spirit had come to the gentile believers in Cornelius' household. Their convictions would have these people as outcasts and unworthy – but now God, because of Jesus Christ, has proven acceptance of Gentiles as members with them within the body of Christ. Just as in all life's circumstances we are better when we allow and listen to a diversity of opinions. In the church one of our key statements can be condensed to: "In faith unity, in opinions liberty, and in all things love." Christian unity is the main desire of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Do our convictions cause us to look at people or groups of people as abominations not worthy of God's acceptance and therefore not worthy of the Good News of Jesus Christ? I wonder if we can sustain that opinion while worshiping the creator on this "Resurrection Sunday." Christ on the cross was intended to be an abomination but Jesus' death and resurrection was one event that reconciled the world to God, not some of us but all of us received forgiveness and grace. The testimony that Jesus calls us to give is a word of faith – that if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. This word of faith does not say that maybe some of you will be saved. Jesus did not tell his disciples when he met with them after the resurrection to keep the message only to themselves, he told them to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation."

That is the job of the church and each of us as a priesthood of believers. There is a reason each Sunday is considered a “little Easter” and that is because the transformation of resurrection day comes to us anew every time we worship our creator. Every time we come to the table and participate in the Lord’s Supper we are reminded that Jesus was risen from the dead and lives. These are celebrations of joy that can only be felt as we remember we are beloved children of God reconciled to him for eternity through the faithful obedience of Jesus Christ to the cross.

The two things go hand in hand – transformation brought about through Jesus’ resurrection and the testimony of that good news to all creation. For those of us who are transformed as we recognize the enormous gift given to us on the day of resurrection we cannot help but share that with others. Church, consider what Jesus’ resurrection means for your life.

It means salvation, it means forgiveness, it means wholeness, it means acceptance, it means peace. Resurrection means that we are no longer held back by fears of shame and persecution, we are given strength beyond measure through Jesus Christ our Lord. Resurrection means that we are free from the pull of sin in our lives, free from the stranglehold of our earthly existence. Resurrection means hope in God’s promises, even when we struggle with patience we can draw strength from the one who defeated death.

These are not just words that we say on this Resurrection morning, these are words that stay with us every day as we become aware of God’s presence in our lives. Looking at Jesus’ resurrection is a reminder and assurance of God’s promise – what God did for Jesus in this world is what God will do for all in the end and out of this world. Jesus’ resurrection confirms our statement of faith that Jesus is Lord and Savior of the world – ALL THE WORLD