

Resurrection Promises

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

April 9, 2023 – Easter Sunday

Text: John 20:1-18

Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed! Such is the ancient Easter greeting which captures within it the most basic promise of the Resurrection. That promise is simply that death is not the end. We are reminded of that promise over and over again in the life of the church. Every Sunday we see the empty cross, our tangible and visible reminder that death, no matter how awful, is not the last word for any of us. The words of the hymns we sing, the prayers we offer each week in worship are all predicated on this resurrection promise – that endings are not what they appear to be and that new beginnings are always, always possible. We don't know what those new beginnings might be, and sometimes those new beginnings are not at all what we want. Yet, new life awaits for us in them anyway. Death is not the end. This is the Resurrection promise we carry with us each day, whether we realize it or not. Admittedly, it's not something we think about a lot. As you're wondering what your groceries are going to cost or how much laundry there is to get done, you are not thinking about the promise of the Resurrection. Yet, somehow, it's still there, like the everlasting arms of the angels we hear about in the psalms. That's because of all the other promises from God the Resurrection reveals and makes possible.

Take hope, for example. Hope is the expression of the Resurrection throughout our lives. What do I mean by that? Well, hope is what we hold on to when life is just completely crazy and we are dragged down into the depths of despair. Like when a loved one dies or when life circumstances take a dramatic turn for

the worse. But, the thing is, we don't have to wait for something really awful before we pull out hope, dust it off and apply it like some sort of cold compress to our wounded souls and psyches. Hope is available to us all the time! We don't have to wait to rely on hope to get us through the day. And we do rely on hope to do this all the time. We just don't think about it that way. For example, we hope the plumber will come at the time promised. We hope that special item we need from the store will be there because we really can't continue on with whatever the project is we're working on without that item. We hope the news from the doctor will be good. We hope we won't owe too much in taxes. We hope our vacation will come off as planned. In other words, we hope that the unseen things we can't control will turn out as we need them to. And the really amazing thing about hope is that, even when our hopes don't pan out, we can still keep right on hoping. And we do. We do because hope is what keeps life – LIFE, as in not death – moving forward. Hope is definitely a promise which comes to us through the Resurrection, and then ripples out through all of life, if we let it. If we're willing to get out of its way.

Another promise of the Resurrection involves learning the skill of not being afraid. This whole notion of not being afraid is present in every Gospel version of the Resurrection. The details of those stories are different, but that encouragement not to be afraid in that extraordinary moment is present in every single one. In two of the four stories, the angels waiting in the tomb tell Mary Magdalene and the others point blank, "fear not." In Luke, the angels tell them Jesus was risen as he promised he would be. No reason to be afraid here! And in John, the text we read today, the

angels ask Mary Magdalene, “woman, why are you weeping?” There is a tenderness in that question, a recognition that fear and loss are threatening to crush this poor woman.

So, if letting go of fear is one of the promises of the Resurrection, what could that mean for us? This is where we do ourselves a disservice because we tend to limit this fear the story evokes to be limited just to fearing death. That is present in the story of the Resurrection of course, but that’s not the only place we encounter fear in our lives, is it? At the threat of impending death or the moment of death itself? Of course not! Anyone who watches the news these days has to be scared in one way or the other because, folks, it’s scary out there! Our children in school are enduring active shooter drills! The weather is clear crazy with California dealing with record snowfalls and Florida in a severe drought. The poles are melting and sea levels are rising. Too many folks in government don’t seem to have a clue. In short, there is plenty to be afraid of these days. And yet this core Resurrection promise is, fear not. How do we do that? Because, as the Resurrection makes clear, all things are possible. Bad things happen but so do an awful lot of wonderful things. There are amazing people doing incredible things all around us. We just have to let go of our fear enough to see them, to hear them, to let them touch our lives. “Fear not” often means fear surrendered, fear handed back to God. Again, not an easy thing to do but how much life is transformed if we do.

Love is another promise of the Resurrection. The Scriptures tell us that God’s love for Jesus was the empowering force behind his raising from the dead. That’s okay, as far as it goes but I don’t

think it goes anywhere near far enough. Why do I say that? Because it begs the question that if God loved Jesus so much that he brought him back from the dead, why didn't God love him enough to keep him from being killed in the first place? If you are a thinking person, you have to ask this question. The standard answer the church has taught for centuries is that Jesus died to atone or make right our sins with God. But what does that even mean? Did God really need Jesus to die because God made humans sinful? Or, if you want to get technical, God gave the humans the chance to avoid the knowledge of good and evil which they blew by taking a bite of an apple? Come on! In their book *The Last Week*, biblical scholars and historians Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan remind us that this is not the only way for Christians to understand Jesus' death and Resurrection. They write, "it took more than a thousand years for this idea to become dominant [in Christianity]. ... [It] first appeared in fully developed form in a book written in 1097 by St. Anselm"¹ who describes it as a sort of divine crime and punishment situation. That's a thousand years after Jesus' death. Doesn't make sense to me and maybe it doesn't to you either. So, if we're not to see Jesus' death and resurrection as atoning sacrifice, how are we to understand it? They continue,

"... the language of sacrifice is only one of several different ways the authors of the New Testament articulate the meaning of Jesus's execution. They also see it as the domination system's 'no' to Jesus (and God), as the defeat of the powers that rule this world by disclosing their moral bankruptcy, as revelation of the path of transformation, and as a disclosure of the depth of God's love for us."²

¹ Borg & Crossan, *The Last Week*, ©2006, Harper One, p. 138

² Ibid. p. 139.

There it is again, that Resurrection promise of God's love for us. The world needed Jesus. God sent Jesus. The world killed Jesus. God raised him back to life because evil never gets the last word. Love does.

This brings us to what might be considered the final promise of the Resurrection – faith. Let's face it, the only way to deal with something as outlandish as a claim that a brutally murdered man was raised back to life by God is through faith. Reason just does not work here because this is simply not a rational situation. But it seems to me it doesn't need to be rational because God is not rational. Let me explain. We humans always want to control things and over the millennia, church officials have tried to control the Resurrection by coming up with explanations that appease that human need for rationality. This is why Anselm came up with that long winded crime and punishment theory which argues Jesus is the necessary blood sacrifice to appease God's great anger over the sins of humanity. That in turn is based on this idea that Jesus turned over the tables in the Temple because he was getting rid of the Jewish Temple sacrifices to replace them with his own sacrifice on the cross. Here again, Borg and Crossan argue that this action by Jesus had nothing to do with establishing his own religion (what we call Christianity) and everything to do with indicting the corruption of the Temple authorities who were in direct collaboration with the imperial forces of Rome. Jesus was not seeking to supplant the system of Temple sacrifice. He was trying to demonstrate that the entire system of worship had been defiled by this unholy connection between Jewish Temple leaders and Rome. They explain further:

“There is nothing wrong with prayer and sacrifice – they are commanded in the Torah. That is not the problem. But God is a God

of justice and righteousness and when worship substitutes for justice, God rejects God's Temple, or for us today, God's church."³

So, if Jesus' actions which ultimately brought him to the cross were a result of his challenging powerful authority forces, what does that mean for faith? How does faith enter into this equation if Jesus' death is not an atoning sacrifice but instead an act of sacrificial bravery? Where is the Resurrection promise of faith here? Simply put, everywhere. Jesus' faith in God gave him the courage to do whatever it was he believed God needed him to do, was calling him to do. God's faith in Jesus was that Jesus, unlike anyone before or since, was uniquely qualified for this work and was willing to sacrifice everything to do it. Jesus had faith that God's teachings about justice for the least of these, about fairness due to all God's people. It is his faith that gave him the courage to take his commitment all the way to its final consequence. The people who knew and loved Jesus recognized this unique God-given ability in Jesus, so much so they knew he was God's Son. They had faith he was doing God's work and they wanted to be a part of it. So too, we see and hear and learn and experience in our faith community all that Jesus was doing as a direct consequence of his faith in God and we seek to do the same. We strive to be like Jesus. We have faith in who he was, to God and to us. We have faith that God intended him for this unique and incredible journey through his life that is still transforming lives 2000 years later. We have faith that, somehow, some way, Jesus was dead and then he was alive again. We don't know how and, honestly, that doesn't matter. It's not rational and it never will be. We, dear ones, have faith that knowing it's not rational

³ Ibid. p. 49

and believing it anyway is the key to becoming all that God intends for us to be and to do.

Claiming hope, letting go of fear, embracing love and daring to have faith – these are the promises of the Resurrection we celebrate on Easter Sunday. The tomb is empty. Death is not the end. This we know, this we believe despite our own disbelief. That, dear ones, is the true miracle of every Easter. Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen indeed. Amen.