

“Love Prevails”

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Over the last week I shared a rather dramatic - for lack of a better word - play about the other thief who was hanging on the other cross, that was last Sunday. Then, Thursday we sat together and shared a symbolic meal in The Commons on Maundy Thursday, and shared a Passover meal, so that we would have a better understanding of the history of the Passover: that experience that Jesus and his Disciples had in the upper room, sharing that meal. Then, we shared in Communion, preparing for Jesus body to be broken and his blood to be shed on Good Friday, where we also experienced another dramatic event, as Nicodemus was introduced to the congregation on Good Friday; so that we could see what it was like for someone who stayed in the shadows, who asked about and couldn't understand what it was like or meant to be born again, and then to come into the shadows again, when he and Joseph of Arimathea snuck back and took the body of Jesus, and laid him in the tomb.

Today rather than do something dramatic - or different - by having it out of the Sanctuary; today I want to talk to you about what this day actually means. What is the Resurrection? Because a lot of times we come into church on Easter Sunday, and we talk about Jesus, dying and being resurrected - and we talk about it like it's the Ascension, like Jesus went up to heaven. So, we talk about Easter as if it is the day of ascension, where we look forward to our resurrection - our ascending into Heaven. But, we don't fully understand what the Resurrection truly is, and how it can impact our lives. And that is what I want to share with you today.

I want to begin by talking about a friend of mine who was a pastor who I served with in my first congregation in seminary. I was serving a bi-lingual Hispanic congregation in Little Village on the southwest side of Chicago, in 1984-1985. This was right after crack came into the community, and guns came in, and it was an incredibly violent place as gangster-types took over the community. This Hispanic community struggled with how to survive when their children turned to drugs and through violence. A lot of them went to this one Pentecostal church, because their idea of the Gospel was to tell everyone, “Don't worry. Just pray that when you go to Heaven everything will be better. Don't worry about doing much in this world. This world is awful. It has drugs. It has guns. It has injustice. Just forget about this world. Focus on being a good person, so that when you die you get to go to Heaven.” That was the resurrection experience for that congregation and it brought tons of people to that church.

And Rev. Aguilar, the pastor who I was serving with and for, who was the senior pastor of that congregation, would get so frustrated, because he said, “Here I am in little Millard Congregational Church, in Little Village. Our church is caring for people who come in from Mexico. Our church is caring and (which was most of my job) dealing with relating to the gangs in Chicago in that section with the Latin Kings and Disciples and the Two-Twos and the Two-Fours trying to get peace, trying to develop a community relationship so they understood that what they were doing was wrong in the eyes of God and that there was hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Meanwhile this church that everybody started going to was telling them, “don’t worry about everything, give up on this world because Heaven is a much better place.” I remember Rev. Nick Aguilar, getting up in the pulpit on an Easter morning and saying to them - and it’s what I have tried to preach ever since: “The Resurrection *already* happened.” And then he would say it in Spanish, and then he would say it again in English. “The Resurrection *already* happened. You are *living* a Resurrection life *now*.” The world changed.

His Old Testament reading that day was from Ezekiel 37 - the dry bones. And he said, the dry bones were rattling, and the skin came together, and all of a sudden you had dead bodies that were now alive. But, in the Old Testament, that resurrection was a resurrection for the people of Israel to leave Babylon, and to have a resurrection so that the people of Israel would now be born again - so that they would now be whole, and Jerusalem would be born anew with a new Temple. That’s what it was: it was about the people of Israel, not the individuals. It was about one group of people and not everyone. That’s what that resurrection was.

But, we have a new Resurrection in Jesus Christ. Since that moment, our new resurrection for the people of Christ is a Resurrection where now the Holy Spirit cared not just for the people of Israel - and it was radical at the time - but now the Resurrection is for the Gentiles.

What that meant was, now the Resurrection is for everyone. Think about what that could mean for us today, if we truly believed it. That if you were part of the LGBTQ community that Resurrection was for you. If you were an immigrant - and hated by many - that Resurrection was for you. If you were ostracized, or felt unwanted in any way, shape or form, that Resurrection was for you.

The same way that the Gentiles were hated by the Jews, they had to come and accept that that Resurrection was for the people they used to hate, and now *had* to love. That is why in the ancient world it was so - during the time of antiquity - it was so difficult for Jews to turn and become Christian, to fulfill the Jewish faith in Jesus the Messiah. It wasn’t that they couldn’t understand the idea of a Messiah. It wasn’t that they couldn’t even accept Jesus as that Messiah. It was the fact that Jesus was rude enough to invite the sinner, and eat with them. It was horrible that Jesus would accept the Gentiles, and other heathens, and include them in the faith.

The Resurrection happened already, and it changed the world, by making it an inclusive place of love, support and care. So, when we have Easter we shouldn’t talk about Easter as this time where, “Yee haw,” we get a free ticket into Heaven, and someday the world will be a good place, because we will have gotten rid of all of the bad people, and we are just going to skip this world, and we are going to go someplace else into Heaven. That is not what it meant.

In one of my previous congregations - and I’m saying that because I have had enough of them [congregations] now, that nobody can kind of go back and figure out who it was on the Internet later [laughter] - there was a woman in the congregation and her husband, and the husband had been a member of this particular congregation for a long time, and he was in trouble his entire life. This poor guy was a mess. He raised his children and, yet, his children just had troubles, because he was never a good father. He was rarely around. He

would try, and then he would fall off the wagon, and he would try again. He was kind of a mess and he went through a few marriages. He just couldn't get himself together. The congregation hoped that one day he would pull it together, because his parents had been [attending] there and his grandparents, so they knew him forever.

Well, all of sudden, one day he started dating a new woman and everyone went, "Oh, dear God." She was even worse. This poor woman was just a wet, hot mess. He thought his kids were bad; hers made his kids look like angels. She could out-drink everybody at the bar. It was just awful and nobody knew what to do.

Then, all of a sudden, one day - and she tells the story beautifully - someone at work talked to her about Jesus Christ, and something hit her like a two-by-four across the side of the head. I think it was the Holy Spirit, because no one - believe me - could have turned that woman around except the Holy Spirit, and from that moment on she never had another drink, and the congregation - who could be kind of above it - embraced her. And, she found a way to bring her family's and his family's kids back together, after the two of them had hurt their children, and they have lived faithfully ever since.

Now, she can't drive the church van, because, frankly, there were just way too many DUIs, but in every other way her life was completely changed. Now, I want to ask you, was that woman's life resurrected? I defy you to say, "No." It was. But it didn't have to wait until she got to Heaven for that Resurrection. That Resurrection happened. She can name the day, the hour and the minute. God's Resurrection already happened. We are living in it.

The challenge is that we keep waiting to go to Heaven for it to start - and it already has. Now, why, then, if there was already this Resurrection - how come this world isn't perfect yet?

Now, my argument is that that isn't God's fault - that [it] is ours. God has given us every tool in the world to make this the new Heaven and the new earth, Heaven isn't just somewhere else - it's all around us - it is here. God is trying to make the new Garden of Eden right here; make this our Heaven - and we have all of the tools through the Holy Spirit - but we don't believe it. We keep waiting to die to go somewhere special when, if we rallied together, we could make that happen here and now. Maybe not perfect, but we could make it darn close. But we have given it away by saying, "I can't wait to die," like those people in Chicago who fled those other churches, to go to the Pentecostal church, where they could just believe that when they died, they would get their ticket to Heaven, to get away from all of the bad things.

God, in the Resurrection, has called us to take *on* the bad things, to make a difference in God's name, so that we can transform this world and resurrect it. That is why we do mission work. That is why Westminster is involved in things like shelter meals. When you go and participate in one of the shelter meals to help those less fortunate, you are offering others the Resurrection.

When we have an LGBTQ community event, that we have had here from time to time, you are having a Resurrection moment. You are helping people who are being felt less than, or [are] treated as though they are less than, and you are opening your arms to them the same way the Jews were required to open themselves to the Gentiles. We are all open to loving

one another and that is why we do that here. When we open ourselves to Family Promise, and we have them in our house seven days a week, we don't just want to provide charity, we want to open ourselves and show them that there is a Resurrection – and [that] you don't always feel different or less than. We want to show you [Family Promise] that you are no different than anyone else. You just need a little help and we are here to provide that. I have seen Resurrection moment after Resurrection moment come from what happens downstairs, because we have let them and encouraged them to live with us in this little place that tries to reflect the new Heaven and the new earth.

I can go on and on with examples. When you look at what happens with the care we provide in El Salvador, it is to show that we are providing a little glimpse of the Resurrection in all parts of the world and that, just like the Gentiles, no one should be excluded. That is why we try to include others from as far and wide as possible.

So today, I want you to remember what my friend Nick Aguilar said so many years ago, standing in a pulpit on the southwest side of Chicago: “Don't wait to die. Start living the Resurrection of Jesus Christ that has been going on for the last two thousand years.”

And, if you can dream it, the Holy Spirit can help you do it. But you can't do it alone. It requires all of our dreams being put together; all of our dreams, from people who are different from us, have different experiences from us, different ideas from us, even disagreements with us. It is only when we all come together that the Holy Spirit can make real and lasting Resurrection change. Then we will see what God put us on this earth for and what Jesus died on that cross for - what Jesus came out of that tomb for: each one of us and for this world. That is what the Resurrection and Easter Sunday is all about.

Amen.