

“Doorways of Hope”
April 16, 2023

John 20:11-18

Noted pastor and author, Jim Wallis, tells the story of a worship service he attended in South Africa in 1988. (The Soul of Politics, Orbis Press, 1994, pg. 235) A nation still clinging tightly to the racist system of apartheid, tensions between white and black South Africans were running high thirty-five years ago. And tensions between the South African government, upholding apartheid, and South African churches, calling for its abolition, had never run higher. The worship service was held on March 13th, around the time of Easter that year. And the preacher during the service was South Africa’s Nobel Prize winning Archbishop, Desmond Tutu.

The sanctuary that morning was surrounded by white, government soldiers armed with high powered guns. Yet, despite the presence of the soldiers and their weapons, Bishop Tutu stood up, walked into the pulpit, and began to speak. “We have come here to say,” he preached, “that evil and injustice and oppression and exploitation embodied in the very nature of apartheid cannot prevail. Therefore, we must assert and assert confidently this day that God is in charge.”

A few moments later, Bishop Tutu walked out of the pulpit to the top stair in the center of the chancel. In his purple robe, he stretched his arms wide like the wings of an angel. And he aimed his final words in the sermon at the soldiers. “You may be powerful,” Tutu proclaimed in a fiery voice. “Indeed, very powerful, but you are not God. You are ordinary mortals. God...the God whom we worship, cannot be mocked. You have already lost. So we are inviting you to come and join the winning side...”

I thought about Bishop Tutu in this week after Easter. And I thought about the Risen Christ...standing at the top of these chancel stairs and stretching out his arms like an angel in his white robe...looking out over this congregation with all the grace and authority of a powerful preacher. And offering his own pointed words:

“I have come here to say that the evil and the injustice and the exploitation of the cross have not prevailed. “Therefore, Pontius Pilate, Judas Iscariot, the religious authorities, the crowds who mocked me, the soldiers who spit on me, the disciples who abandoned me. Even people this very day who doubt me and deny me and crucify my brothers and sisters. All of you who were convinced that death would hold me down. You are ordinary mortals. But God, the God whom you worship, the God who sent me into the world, the God who lifted me up out of the grave. My God cannot be mocked. You have already lost on this day. So here I am and I’m inviting all of you to come now and join the winning side.”

We are here on this first Sunday after Easter to assert with confidence that God is in charge. We are here to assert confidently that our God will not be mocked. And we are here to assert confidently that we are a part of the winning side.

Christianity doesn't get any better! Christ's victory over death is ours and we're on the winning side!

But it isn't always that easy. Resurrection isn't always so cut and dry. Sometimes, in fact, it's difficult to assert anything about the resurrection with confidence...

As far as we know, whenever a human body is put into the ground that's the end of the story.⁽¹⁾ As far as we know, nobody hangs around a cemetery or a gravesite waiting for a dead person to reappear so that the two can pick up where they left off. We might talk longingly about meeting someone on the other side, where death meets life everlasting. But not on this earthly side.

Death offers us an opportunity to pay our last respects to the one we love. It gives a chance for the living to say good-bye to the one who has died in a spirit of gratitude and celebration. And it leaves us figuring out a way to continue with our lives as best we can, even though life will never be quite the same as it was before.

That's all Mary Magdalene was doing on Easter morning. Marking Jesus' death by paying her last respects. Trying to find the words and the strength necessary to say good-bye to her master, she went to the tomb looking for a way to go on living even though Jesus wasn't alive to go on with her.

What Mary didn't expect, and how could she have, was to find the tomb empty. No dead body to pay last respects to. No body to give her any certainty or comfort or peace of mind. No body to give her the closure she needed to move on with her life. Just a rumpled white linen cloth on the tomb floor and enough questions to bring tears to Mary's eyes.

In the midst of her sadness and confusion, Mary failed to realize that someone was walking up behind her. "Woman, why are you weeping?" said the voice, talking just quietly enough that Mary wouldn't be startled.

Mary turned her head in surprise. First, she assumed he was the gardener. Then when the man spoke to her again, she recognized his voice. And she knew he was her beloved master. Then when Mary reached out to hold onto him, the Risen Christ disappeared.

Running all the way back to the disciples, Mary announced in a breathless voice, "I have seen the Lord!" Christianity doesn't get any better! The Risen Christ calls us by name and we run and tell the world we have seen the Lord!

But resurrection isn't always that simple either. There were people in the world, including the male disciples themselves, who did not believe Mary. Who thought her story was nonsense with no grounding in truth.

Some things in life that seem possible, reasonable and understandable in hindsight often seemed quite impossible, unreasonable and illogical when we were first facing them. (The Soul of Politics, pg. 238-39) The changes, the opportunities, the surprises none of us could have imagined once upon a time are now a part of history.

Somewhere between possible and impossible, between reasonable and unreasonable, between understandable and illogical, there is a door. And that door is called “hope.” The Good News shared by Mary Magdalene eventually became for millions of Christians in the world the greatest hope we have ever heard. And yet for many who heard Mary’s news, it was nothing more than nonsense. On one side of the door, the best thing ever. On the other side of the door, absolutely ludicrous. And the door itself was hope.

Hope unbelievably is always considered nonsense. But hope believed is history being transformed. The nonsense of the resurrection became the hope that shook the Roman Empire and formed the foundation of the early Christian church. The nonsense of Bishop Tutu’s words in a sanctuary surrounded by soldiers became the hope that later led to the downfall of apartheid, the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and a new democratic South Africa.

The nonsense of the Montgomery Bus Boycott became the hope that catalyzed the Civil Rights Movement and gave fuel to the dream that all people in this country would be treated equally. The nonsense of the Stonewall riots in Greenwich Village became the hope that led to marriage equality for LGBTQ people across our land. The nonsense of oppressed people became the prayer of hope that led to the overthrow of brutal dictators like Pol Pot and Slobodan Milosevic.

The victories, the revolutions, the transformations, the triumphs of the poor and the oppressed, the monumental achievements of justice and peace. They seemed impossible at first. But in each case, they became possible when someone stepped through the door of hope. And now they are a part of history.

Christianity doesn’t get any better! Someone or some group of people found the courage to walk through the doorway and nonsense became reality for millions of people!

If only resurrection was that cut and dry. Because in order to walk through the doorway of hope, you have to believe that the doorway exists. And then you have to believe that something is on the other side. Not everyone can see the doorway of hope and very few people can imagine anything on the other side. What’s more, the people who see the door and envision what’s on the other side. Those are the people who often suffer abuse and mockery and humiliation and even crucifixion.

Yet a long time ago, sometimes between a dark afternoon on a cross and an early morning outside an empty tomb, Jesus Christ walked through the doorway of hope. And the amazing, incredible thing is that the Risen Christ left the doorway of hope wide open.

So that Mary Magdalene and the people of South Africa and people of different races and gender identities and sexual orientations in this nation could walk through behind him.

So here we are on the Sunday after Easter because you and I are on the winning side! We have seen the Lord! The door of hope is wide open waiting for us to walk through it and then hold it open for others to do likewise! Christianity doesn't get any better! Amen.

(1) Rev. Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Unnatural Truth," in The Christian Century, March 20-27, 1996.

