

“Resurrecting Justice”

John 20:27-28

1 Corinthians 15:12-26

May 3, 2020

North UMC

There is a strange line in the story about Thomas’ encounter with the risen Christ. Jesus appears to him and the disciples late one night and invites Thomas to verify his identity by poking his finger into his wounds from the crucifixion. Ok, that’s weird but what is even weirder is Thomas’ reaction. He says, ‘My Lord and my God!’ It is an affirmation of belief that Jesus was alive, but more so, an affirmation of commitment and trust to Jesus as his sovereign God. That sounds like standard religious jargon to us.

Yet, the line was lifted from Emperor Domitian. Domitian was the Caesar of the Roman Empire at the time the Gospel of John was written. Domitian was loved and feared as an authoritarian ruler, one of the best at expanding the economic, political and military power of the Empire. His 15 year reign began when the Praetorian Guard installed him as the new emperor. To solidify his authority, he revived the old Imperial Cult which claimed that the Caesar and his family were gods. His supporters were fond of calling him, ‘Dominus et Deus noster’ — ‘My Lord and my God.’

John stole a political line and stuck it on one of the key stories about the appearance of the resurrected Jesus. No accident. It gives meaning to the resurrection.

But what does it mean? What did an emperor have to do with the resurrection? More importantly, what does this title for the resurrected Christ mean for us today?

HOW THE ANCIENTS UNDERSTOOD ‘RESURRECTION’

In those days, most Jews believed in the idea of a resurrection. Some, such as the Sadducees or the Jewish philosopher Philo, agreed with the pagans that all you get in the afterlife is a disembodied soul. But for the Pharisees and most others, the resurrection was a future hope. Resurrection would happen at the very end of time, a day on which the dead were raised. Some judged and condemned, others vindicated for their faithfulness, like the Maccabean revolutionaries who had rescued the Temple from Greek defilement that is celebrated in Hanukkah. This day would be a raising and a restoring of bodies, like the vision of Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones. It was not a metaphor about the immortality of the soul. If it was a metaphor for anything it was for the restoration of the nation Israel.

The early Christians held these ideas in common with their Jewish kin, and this end-time day of resurrection is what Paul is talking about in First Corinthians.

What was unique was their affirmation that the resurrection had already started with the raising of Jesus. The resurrection hope had already begun in Jesus and the effects of his resurrection were already being experienced in their lives. Resurrection now and it would culminate with that hope of a resurrection day. Jesus’ resurrection inaugurates the resurrection experience. His resurrection kick-starts it in and among us. And so, the resurrection of Jesus was not an isolated escape from death by a lone hero. And so, Paul said that his resurrection was the first fruit of more, much more, to come, but that hope was beginning now in the raising of Jesus.

RESURRECTION VICTORY, RESURRECTION PROTEST

Jesus' resurrection was a victory. Jesus' resurrection is God's power of new life at work in the world today. The resurrection of Christ is God's victory over the forces of death at work in humanity and the cosmos. The Latin American theologian and priest brothers Leonardo and Clovis Boff said it best:

'The resurrection has to be seen as full liberation from all the obstacles standing in the way of the lordship of God and the full realization of all the dynamic forces for life and glory placed by God within human beings and the whole of creation.'

Jesus' resurrection is the power of new life and the hope of liberation in this life. Latin American Liberation theologians understand this because they are faced with the daily forces of death at work in economic exploitation of the poor and political oppression. The resurrection is not a one-time past event but a present power of God giving life and hope in the midst of destruction and domination.

Jesus' resurrection was a protest. The forces of death are well at work in the world today but so is the resurrection as God's protest against the forces of death. The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, put it this way: 'For [the believer] the resurrection of Christ is not merely consolation in suffering; it is also the sign of God's protest against suffering.' God is the God of life. We saw this in the creation, for God said it is good. We saw this in the exodus, for God liberated the Israelites from slavery. And so, in line with that history and fulfilling that history, God raised Jesus from the dead as an act of protest against the forces of death. When Thomas proclaims the risen Christ as 'My Lord and my God' he is affirming this victory and echoing this protest against the Domitians in the world that are the agents of death and oppression.

Jesus' resurrection was not a symbol for the natural rhythm of life and nature. It was not a celebration of tulip bulbs blooming in Spring. A resurrection is not a recurrence. Jesus' resurrection was not the resuscitation of a corpse. Jesus was not a zombie, nor was he simply like Lazarus who had been revived so that he could resume his regular life. The resurrection is not religious jargon for a banal observation nor is it a resumption of the status quo. Resurrection is an interruption in the rhythm of life and death. Resurrection is a transformation of the status quo. If that all there was, then you and I are wasting our time this morning and we can find more entertaining things to watch on YouTube.

Jesus' resurrection was the beginning of God's new life at work among us right now. His resurrection was the beginning of God's victory over the forces of death and God's persistent protest of those forces until the end of time.

RESURRECTING SOCIAL JUSTICE

And those forces were not merely spiritual and psychological, subjective experiences of despair, discouragement and disbelief. They were also physical, material, political, economic suffering from hunger, torture, war, pollution, and violence.

We have a tendency to see the Christian faith in individualistic. And so, we reduce the resurrection to a spiritual transformation. We have a tendency to see the Christian hope as otherworldly. And so, we equate the resurrection to eternal life in the afterworld. The resurrection certainly does create spiritual

transformation and secures our everlasting life. But if we stop there, we have ignored Thomas' confession and Paul's insights.

Jesus' resurrection is also the raising of social justice. The risen Christ is our Lord and our God, whose sovereignty is not restricted to the mind, the soul or heaven. It is God's victory over all the forces of death and it is God's protest against all the forces of death, including every economic policy, social phenomenon and political ideology that destroys life. Otherwise, we cannot say with Thomas, 'My Lord and my God.'

Wherever poverty is being overcome with equality, there is the risen Christ. Wherever the oppressed are speaking out for freedom, there is the risen Christ. Wherever the abused have the courage to walk away from their abusers, there is the risen Christ. Wherever the sick are being healed, there is the risen Christ. Wherever the lands and waters and skies are being restored, there is the risen Christ. In these acts of liberation the confession of faith is enacted, 'My Lord and my God' against those who make false claims to absolute power and authority to control and destroy life.

THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

The connection between social transformation and the resurrection is in Jesus' body.

Again, he was not a zombie or simply picked up where he left off. A resurrected body is a transformed body and something beyond our ability to comprehend. Indeed, there is no 'historical' evidence for his risen body. In fact, the Bible is not designed for that criteria. There is no story of the resurrection itself in any of the Gospels; there are only stories of his post-resurrection appearances. The purpose of his embodied resurrection is not scientific evidence to prove a past event. Resurrection is a matter of faith, which no amount of evidence can ever secure.

But I believe it matters for our faith to affirm that his resurrection was embodied, in some way or fashion, and not just as a spirit or a symbol of a rise of faith in the disciples.

His body matters because our bodies matter to God. Bodies are about material stuff and all the things related to our concrete daily lives, and that stuff—of eating and working and the like—matter to God who created our material lives and indeed called them good.

His body matters because all bodies are social bodies. We relate to one another as being in time and space, not merely as psychological entities or spiritual amoebas. And our relationships matter to God who has always had a relationship in history with Israel that began with Abraham and culminates with Jesus. The God was concerned with Israel's social, political, economic, ecological relationships and was concerned with those relationships when Jesus ministered. Likewise, our relationships matter to God. And all of this is represented in Jesus' raised body as the manifestation of God's victory of new life for the whole person.

It is Jesus' risen body—strange and sometimes not recognizable because it is transformed—that is the crucial link between his ministry before crucifixion and the power of his resurrection to fulfill and keep extending that ministry. How did Thomas and the disciples recognize the risen Jesus? By the marks of his death—his nail scars in his hands and side. They were only able to identify the risen Christ by the

marks of his state sponsored torture and execution. His resurrection did not erase that memory, but his risen body was living proof of the victory over the forces of Roman domination.

This continuity and fulfillment is even bigger than his earthly ministry. The body represents his identity as an Israelite. The God who liberated the Israelites from Egypt has culminated that liberating, new life power in his resurrection. In Jesus, God is resurrecting social justice.

I believe it is crucial for my faith to affirm Jesus' embodied resurrection because it expresses the full effects of the resurrection. The creeds declare that we believe in 'the resurrection of the body.' What this means is that God's new life transforms our material and social conditions. Because Jesus' body was resurrected, his resurrection power extends into our social relations and material conditions. To be sure, this is not an either-or between our bodies and our souls, the individual and society, this life and the afterlife. It means that God's power to give us new life extends into every aspect of our lives.

Because the risen Christ is 'my Lord and my God' of every dimension of our lives, we are agents of his resurrection in society now. That means two things for us:

One, the risen Christ inspires us to dream new visions of hope for our society. Because his risen body is not a resuscitation of the status quo but the victory of new life, we can envision a just society, a peaceful world, an equitable economy, a healed creation. We are inspired by the Spirit of the risen Christ to plan these new ways of living. The Spirit of Christ dwells in our hearts and minds enlivening us to see these God-given alternatives and instills the tenacity and cunning to enact them.

Two, the risen Christ empowers us to work for justice in our society. We are given the strength and tenacity to work for justice and peace. We are emboldened by his Spirit to protest the forces of death. Because this work is so hard and complex, we will be worn down and discouraged. We do not have it in ourselves to overcome these social problems. Yet, we have the power of the risen Christ in us to energize our work and witness.

We sang at the beginning, 'He Lives'—'He lives, he lives, salvation to impart! You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart.' To that I say, Amen! But remember, the Jesus who lives in our hearts was also the Jesus who chased the money changers out of the Temple, called the Pharisees hypocrites, ate with sinners, was nailed to a Roman cross, and was raised to victory over all the forces of death. If that Jesus lives in our hearts, then we are inspired and empowered to do the work of liberation.

Oscar Romero was inspired and empowered to confront the forces of death in El Salvador. If ever there was an example of the forces of death it was on display in that nation's government in the 1970s. A brutal dictatorship and exploitative elites were oppressing and persecuting peasants, and a number of priests were speaking out on behalf of the peasants. At that time, Romero was selected to be the nation's archbishop because he was a safe bet for the alliance between the church and the aristocracy. He would make no waves. Unlike Father Rutilio Grande who was one of the renegade priests.

On March 12, 1977—during Lent—Father Grande was assassinated by the security forces. He was enroute to a nearby village in a VW along with a teenager, an elderly man, and group of children they picked up along the way. He was going to the village to celebrate a mass for a feast day. A small pick up truck began following them, and then it sped alongside them shooting into the car. All but the children in the backseat were killed. Grande was shot 12 times. A man from the truck ordered the three children

to leave and they ran back to town. The weapons and ammunition used were common to the local police.

The three bodies were placed in front of the altar in the church in the village. Archbishop Romero presided over a mass that lasted until midnight. The next Sunday, the archbishop declared a single memorial mass for the entire nation which drew 100,000 people to come to the cathedral in San Salvador. After the mass, the archbishop spent hours listening to stories of suffering from local peasant farmers.

The next morning, Romero announced that he would not attend any state occasions nor meet with the president until the death was investigated. No investigation was ever conducted and thus Romero never attended a state occasion during the three years he was archbishop. In 1980, Romero was assassinated by security forces as he celebrated the Eucharist.

His first pastoral letter confronting the forces of death and envisioning new life was delivered on Easter, one month after Grande's martyrdom. In that letter, he declared: 'In his resurrection there began now in history the reign of eternal life, holding out to us the opportunity for bold changes in history and in life.' And he called on the church to work for peace and justice: 'The Easter Christ continues, lives, in the Easter church....for the whole purpose of the church's existence is to make obvious and operative, in the midst of humanity, the abundant energy of the death and resurrection of the Lord.'

Let us be an Easter church. Let us inspire visions of resurrection and let us be empowered by the risen Christ to do the work of justice today.