

LESSONS IN LIVING

Easter

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
April 4, 2010

Scripture Reading: Mark 16:1-8 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

The second reading comes from Colossians. It might be good to do a small introduction here. Do you remember that feeling that you had when you were a kid, and you noticed the difference between the church as you live it out, and a real church as it's described in the Bible...like this huge kind of gap between the kind of intensity and joy that you see in the early church and in what it has become? Maybe you have or maybe you haven't, but that has certainly had a very central impact in my life. When I began to study the early church, I discovered sources that said that Christianity began along with the mystery religions in the ancient world, and what it was trying to get across was something much closer to the eastern concept of enlightenment, but it called it *agape love* – a sense of connection with all beings, a sense of joy at just being alive, and I think that is the gift the early church was giving people.

I believe what we have in our passage today is one of the early handbooks, and the assumption for the people hearing these words, is, “you’ve been through the initiation; years of grueling, training, learning. You’ve been through a cave in order to initiate you into this deeper compassion, deeper love. When you get to the end, they lift up a mirror and you’re supposed to have an experience of yourself as the realization of what you’ve been taught.” In that context, please hear these words: (Colossians 3:1-4)

Since you’ve been resurrected with Christ, set your heart on what pertains to higher realms, where Christ is seated at God’s right hand. Let your thoughts be on heavenly things, not on the things of earth. After all, you died, and now your life is hidden with Christ in God. But when Christ – who is your life – is revealed, you too will be revealed with Christ in glory.

We had a pastoral emergency this week, so I turned in the title of the sermon and went down to San Antonio for several days. It was after the sermon in the first service I looked down and saw the title of what I said I was going to be preaching on. That’s not what you going to hear today. I completely forgot. Come back next year and that’s what we’ll...(laughter) It’s exciting to have something to look forward to.

Easter sermons are the hardest of the year for me, and it’s not because there’s a bigger crowd, although that’s often true, or that the topic’s hard, although that’s also true. But what happens is we talk the Christian story as symbolic all year round. We talk about these stories – we unpack them - we try to move away from a literal understanding. And then once a year we have this wonderful rush of visitors in and I see the look of horror on the faces. That’s what I’m looking at during the Easter sermon. It’s like people are thinking, “Oh, my God, what have I done? Is there still time to find another church?” No, probably not, so relax and enjoy.

As I said a moment ago I believe the gift of the early church was something that is no less than the eastern idea of enlightenment – a radical change not just in how you live, but in how you perceive. And when it talked about heaven, it wasn't talking about someplace else; it was talking about a rapturous appreciation of the depth, the spiritual sacred depth, of this world. Now when it talked about Christ had risen and sitting up in the sky, it was talking about all of your ideals lifted up and perceiving the world, with its chaos, with its turmoil, with its misery as still the theatre on which this wonderful sacredness is manifest. But, when you've been taught these stories are literally true, it's very painful to unpack them and it's sort of a train wreck every Easter because I don't want to step on anybody's toes, but I'm not able to avoid that sometimes.

The religion that most people were taught is the idea that was intended for children – literal, concrete stories that would symbolize the deeper levels of love and compassion, where you would take responsibility for your life and go out into the world. You wouldn't surrender responsibility to the church or to invisible beings. Instead, those symbols would take you deeper into your own capacity. They also did not separate this sense of enlightenment from how we treat each other. When the church separates spirituality and politics, what it allows us to do is to try to sprinkle holy water on whatever causes we bring to this day instead of consecrating our causes to a greater cause...instead of consecrating everything we do to the common life, which is what the world needs. So when the early church was baptizing, it wasn't baptizing into the church. It was baptizing into life, into the world, and into a cause to make the whole world as it is in heaven, with the knowledge that that doesn't happen, but that a life worth living is dedicated to that kind of sacredness, that kind of compassion, that kind of universality.

If I talk about love on Sunday and hurt you on Monday, if we come together in the church and we love each other, but we hate the people that live across the street because they're not Christian, or they're not American, we invalidate the life that we're called to in these texts. But that process of coming to terms -- that our religion taught to us is childish and hurtful -- can be painful and can feel like a death and often we have to mourn our way out of it if we are to become spiritual adults. So, every year I start off a sermon this way, and I see the blood rushing from faces, the flowers on the Easter bonnets wilting, but I think it has always been like that really for all of us. We are called to a higher level of living. It sounds very strange when we start talking about the symbols – the stories as symbols, but it's absolutely essential for our own honesty to realize that this story of death and resurrection pre-exists Christianity. When the first Christians heard it, they had only heard it about other people. They'd go into a cave, they'd disappear for three days, the crowd comes and the person's not there. That's an old, old story by the time Christianity is born. We need to have the courage and the honesty to recognize that because what it means is the people that heard the story never considered taking the story literally. The story breaks down – now part of my problem is that my grandparents were morticians, so the idea of cadavers getting up is not that inspirational for me. (laughter) When you've had the actual concrete experience of bodies, you realize that's not the end of the story, and you don't need for them to get back up again, and there are problems if they do. For example, clothes! Do clothes rise up from the dead, too? Now, it's one thing if just a body gets up, but for people who believe in ghosts, do the clothes get up, too? Are the clothes immortal, too? It's kind of like Superman when you start asking, "well, how do they cut the cloth for his Superman suit?" Uh, oh, I disillusioned somebody with Superman. (laughter) The symbols are intended to break down. They are intended to break down because they're not trying to get you into the past, they're not trying to get you to believe something happened in the past; they are trying to awaken you to a depth in right now - in how we live.

So the story walks you through that. What you may be seeing in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John was a kind of morality play that was given when people had been initiated. But the wonderful thing about the stories is that you could tell them to the people who had not yet been initiated to begin the process. And

then when you start having experiences that are deeper, you have some vocabulary with which to talk about them. That's what symbols can do for us. That's what stories can do for us. In the story, the angel – in one story it's an angel, in another, it's just a person, in another, it's two angels, if there were ten gospels, it would, no doubt, include The Mormon Tabernacle Choir. It just gets bigger and bigger as you tell the story over and over again. In Mark, it's just a person sitting there, because what's important is the message that's being said. In all of the gospels, the same message is said: fear not! This movement into compassion begins when we stop letting fear govern our lives. Now that may not sound like a revolutionary concept, but you cannot be a traditional theologian and answer that calling. Why? Because in traditional Christianity you are told to believe in Hell, and if you believe in Hell, you have to have fear. Is that not true? If there's a Hell, you should be afraid of it, if not for yourself, then for other people. How could you enjoy heaven if even your worst enemy is being tortured every day for the rest of eternity? You could not do that, so certainly, universal love could not do that. So the angel says "fear not." The angel had not been through confirmation class...right? (laughter) In most traditional theology - not the original story, but most traditional theology, after it became corporate, let's say, and the church became a business - fear became a much better motivator than love and compassion. You can make a whole lot more money by scaring people. And you can get a whole lot more people that can operate at that level than a level where you have to really struggle for years and years and years, and at the end of it, you're just a more compassionate person. Who wants that? (laughter)

So the first thing the angel says that is a refutation of much traditional theology is, "Don't be afraid!" "Don't be motivated by your fear of the Devil, of Hell." See, in the early church, they're talking to people who were already afraid. They already believed in demons and Hell, so they were trying to get them out of that fear. What the modern church does is get you scared first and then save you from it...that's not the same thing. "You should be ashamed of everything you've ever done, but Jesus forgives you." If a business did that, you would arrest them for that. You can't set the fire and then call yourself the Fire Department when you put it out.

The second thing it says is, "Come and look". It says this over and over again. You don't believe it happened, come in and look. How many times has the church said that? It says just believe, just have faith. The Gospel says go into your experience and see if it is true. Nothing can replace that...nothing can replace that. Go into your experience – your real life – not some story about something that happened 2,000 years ago someplace else. But let the story take you deeper into your own real life, and see if you don't experience the sacred there. I always liked the phrase from Feuerbach. When I was in Seminary, we studied this obscure person named Feuerbach, who's wonderful. He said he "loathed the type of Christianity that people had to pluck their eyes out so they could believe better."

The third thing that happens in this story is that Jesus says to those trying to hold on to him, "Don't hold on to me...I'm in transition...I'm changing...don't hold on to your image of me." Now, I don't know about you, but I didn't hear that a lot. What you're taught in traditional theology is to form a concrete idea of Jesus and hold on to it, and even if it says nothing to you about how you should treat anyone else, just have a one-on-one relationship with that image. That is not Christianity. If you have a relationship with Christ, you're going to have to change your relationship to everyone.

Now what I want to do is read something to you...you heard the reading from Colossians. I want to read something from Buddhism. Now that may sound like a real leap away from the text, but see if you don't hear the same principles at play in this text that you hear in these stories:

To train yourself in sitting meditation (za-zen) is to train yourself to be a sitting Buddha. If you train yourself in za-zen, (you should know that) Zen is neither sitting nor

lying. If you train yourself to be a sitting Buddha, (you should know that) the Buddha is not a fixed form. Since the Darma has no (fixed) abode, it is not a matter of making choices. If you (make yourself) a sitting Buddha this is precisely killing the Buddha. If you adhere to the sitting position, you will not attain the principle (of Zen).

Ku-tsun-hsu, 1. 1, p.2.

Now what that means is, if you ever forget that what you are doing is a symbol that's taking you into deeper life, religion becomes the hindrance that traps you. Whether it's theology where you let your image of God get between you and your relationship to the Sacred, or whether you form a relationship with some image you have of Christ, and then you can't get along with people, the symbols can take you deeper in relationship, they can take you deeper into reality, but you have to know what they are doing. You have to recognize that they are symbols. So, just as what you're trying to do in Buddhism is become a sitting Buddha, in Christianity, the point is not just to say nice things about Jesus, but to become Christ-like.

Hear Paul's words again:

Since you've been resurrected with Christ,
(See, he's not talking just about the resurrection of Jesus now)
set your heart on what pertains to higher realms, where Christ is seated at God's right hand. Let
you thoughts be on heavenly things, not on the things of earth.
(And that's not talking about two different worlds; it's talking about two different ways
of understanding this world.)
After all, you died, and now your life is hidden with Christ in God. (Now listen to this)
But when Christ – who is your life --
(Have you ever heard that before...a symbol of something deeper within you?)
is revealed, you too will be revealed with Christ in glory

Now that seems like a train going in a very different direction than what we've sometimes been taught. Now that doesn't mean we have to jettison traditional Christianity, but traditional Christianity needs to be deepened where it doesn't leave this part out. What good is it to get along with Jesus and not be able to get along with each other? What good is it to have an ethical principle that you suspend when your nation tells you to kill? What good is it to say that human beings are the most important gift on earth, and then your business demands that you exploit others?

In the early church, baptism was not sprinkling holy water on what we want to do. It was giving ourselves to the life process and to the common life, and dedicating and consecrating ourselves, and dying into that life, because it can feel like that.

In the story – in the resurrection stories, have you ever noticed how many mistaken identities happen? They're in the garden, they talk to a gardener...oh, wait a minute, that was Jesus – that was Jesus. They're on the way to Emmaus, they have a conversation...oh, wait a minute, that was Jesus. Why did they put that in there? When the disciples got together, why did they say Jesus was manifested – a resurrection appearance that some didn't believe? Because their world was no different than your world. There's as much sacredness in your world as there was in theirs, and there's as much pain and confusion in their world as there is in ours. We have to stop praying for a different world, and begin praying to be different kinds of people.

When the people got together after Jesus was dead - I could almost picture them on the mountain, because everybody was told to go to the mountain - they're all sitting there and saying, "Well, when is Jesus going to get here? He said for us to meet here." And then one of them says, "You know what's weird? I was in the garden, and I was talking to the gardener, and, you know, I felt Christ in that conversation. Isn't that weird? I felt everything I had loved about Jesus when I was talking to that person." And then somebody said, "Well, you know, that's strange; because on the way here, I talked to these strangers, and afterwards, it was like I had been with Christ."

See, the resurrection happens, not when a body gets up - (I don't know what happened...maybe it did happen. I don't know or care) the resurrection that's being talked about here happens when we see Christ in each other...when our physical relationship with Jesus leads us to the kind of universal love that Jesus lived for and died for. But to get to Christ, Jesus has to die. To get to universal love, you have to let childhood religion go. It hurts, you give yourself time, you get support, nobody laughs at anybody...but, if we're going to save our world, we're not going to do it with traditional Christianity, 2,000 years dead.

The world doesn't need more cadavers to get up. We've got plenty. In Washington, in every hall of power, at the height of every denomination in the world, there are cadavers. We need to come to life wherever we are. If you're Buddhist, you meditate to become sitting Buddha. If you're Christian, you want not to just say nice things about Jesus; you want the love of Christ.

The resurrection happens when we have that kind of love - when people who live on the other side of the world feel like our children - when we cannot go along with bullying, even if it's our nation doing it - when we can't go along with greed even if our business demands it of us.

Something has happened to us. Something has died and something has been born. The resurrection happens when we stop seeing the sacred only in Jesus and we begin to see it in each other.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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