

EASTER – April 21, 2019

Luke 24: 1-12

Prayer: O Lord, we pray that you are with us on this day of all days. Let us understand the resurrection in the way you would have us understand. Let us live into the resurrection in the way you would have us live. In the name you wore on that perplexing day, Amen.

Resurrections in Progress

When you preach in the same place every Sunday for many years, there is time to develop communal stories, a communal history. You know my casts of characters.

For better or worse, you are privy to every thought that's ever passed through my head.

But I've had a lot of outside speaking engagements this winter and spring. And it's always a challenge to know which stories will be most instructive for a particular audience.

Are they seeking to be challenged about missions, or are they murder mystery fans?

Are they facing urban gentrification, or someone in need pulling off the interstate?

Do they want to know about homelessness in our community or theirs?

Are the listeners in disagreement about how best to help, how to prevent *toxic charity*?

In crafting whatever message I think appropriate, sometimes I include Lee King, whom I spoke about during Lent. Sometimes, Sippio. Denise. Alec. Sometimes my former associate, Alfred, or former pianist Russ. Circles graduates Morgan and Vincent. Several men who opened our eyes to mental disability.

But any given speech can hold only one or two such examples. And I find myself having to pick and choose among some of these wonderful life stories. Having to pick and choose among these stories I call resurrections in progress.

Here's one of my favorites. Lois was an early visitor to Triune, a woman in her 40s, very calm and polite. When we met her, she had been sleeping for 18 months beside a dumpster outside the Greenville Convention

Center. She suffered from depression. She began meeting with our mental health worker about abuse and other issues.

Lois became one of our guinea pigs in our first Triune Circles, our year-long program in which we train a circle of volunteers to come alongside someone – to encourage, cheerlead, advise, network, but not to rescue. Not to buy out of situations.

During her Circles year, Lois got a set of dentures. She enrolled in Greenville Tech. And she moved into a charming little house supplied by Greenville Mental Health.

On her birthday, her Circle members went to her house with balloons, cake and a pink dogwood tree to plant outside her brand-new picture window. As she was telling me about it later, she said, “Pastor, only people who had taken the time to know me and love me could have known that dogwood was the best gift I could have ever received.”

But of course, that dogwood wasn't the best gift. The best gift was having four new friends who knew the meaning of the dogwood tree.

As often happens, when Lois got on her feet, she moved to another state to live near her sister. Her resurrection remains a work in progress.

Some of you may remember Denise. Denise lived on the streets for many, many years and came to every meal and every worship service. But she could be disruptive.

Sometimes she snarled at people who tried to sit next to her. Occasionally she sang and talked during the service. She would hit Mr. Earl's bongos whenever she passed them.

In those days I was trying hard to remember names because a homeless man had once asked, “Do you know the worst thing about being homeless? It's not being cold or wet or hungry. The worst thing about being homeless ... is being looked right through.”

So one Sunday morning, as Denise knelt at the altar rail to receive communion, I very intentionally said, “The body of Christ broken for you, Denise. The blood of Christ shed for you.”

And she whirled to the Furman professor kneeling next to her, and beamed. “Pastor knows my name!”

Denise taught me the power of looking and seeing, of touching shoulders and making eye contact. Like Lois, Denise doesn’t come around much anymore. Our social workers got her into a safe apartment.

Denise’s resurrection remains a work in progress.

Today is the central day in the Christian year, the most triumphant, the most world-tipping, the most written about, talked about, preached about moment in our history. Resurrection Day.

For the past few Easters, we have read from the gospels of John or Mark. So when I read Luke’s version of this story for the first time in awhile, I thought, *Wait a minute. Did he finish?* I skipped to the next verse, and he was on to another scene on Easter evening.

Let’s turn now to **Luke 24: 1-12**, and see what he’s doing with this odd manner of storytelling.

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they (*the women*) came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they went in, they did not find the body.

⁴While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.’ ⁶Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.’

⁸Then they remembered his words, ⁹and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.

¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

¹²But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

In most books we read, the author writes a scene in a single block, then skips a few spaces and begins another scene, another block. That's essentially what is happening here.

Our passage ends with verse 12. Then verse 13 starts an entirely new scene, the walk to Emmaus. It takes place hours later as Jesus appears to two men walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

So this Easter morning story actually ends with some mystery, some unfinished business.

I am unsettled by the last line, and I think Peter is, too.

"Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened."

There is no appearance by the resurrected Jesus such as the gospel writers Matthew and John have. No explanation. No *aha* moment in which Peter realizes that the Lord has risen.

Peter simply went home, **"amazed at what had happened."**

This story strikes me as unfinished, just like Lois's story, just like Denise's story.

There is no body in the tomb, but what does it mean? What is the result? What happens next?

That part is still to be written, at the end of Luke's gospel and in the book of Acts.

That part is still to be written, in the lives of Lois and Denise.

That part is still to be written, in every one of our lives.

Look at some of the words in this scene: The women were **"perplexed."** The women were **"terrified."** When they told the disciples what they'd seen, the disciples deemed it **"an idle tale."** Another translation says they considered it **"nonsense."** And Peter, **"amazed,"** simply went home.

These are not words of triumph. Nothing, absolutely nothing, seemed resolved on this first Easter morning.

Because in many ways, the resurrection is not the end of the story, but the beginning.

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Only in the ensuing scenes do we get a glimpse of what happens when people are confronted by the resurrection. The women, of course, have already taken action by notifying the disciples.

In the very next scene, Cleopas and another follower encounter the resurrected Jesus on the road to Emmaus. They take action – again, by notifying the 11 disciples.

In the scene after that, the disciples themselves receive a visit from the resurrected Jesus. And they get their marching orders to proclaim the resurrection to all nations. They take action – which is recounted in the book of Acts.

This early morning resurrection scene appears unfinished because it is unfinished. Without us, it is unfinished.

Because the resurrection is not the end of the story, but the beginning.

Each of us is confronted with this Easter scene and must decide how to react. How to inhabit it. How to take action. How to live it out.

Nicki Day called me one afternoon two weeks ago and declared, “I believe in the resurrection!” She’d been hiking on a beautiful spring day.

The resurrection comes alive to us at different times, in different ways. At times, we are fragile and frail and flawed and unequipped to step into its power. And at times, we are strengthened by the knowledge of a risen savior and then we’re ready. We’re ready.

One of the questions I get asked most often about my work here is, “How do you keep going when you have so many people fail?” And we do. People fall back into addiction. They lose apartments. They return to jail.

But we also see lives resurrected. And if you think all my Easter sermons sound eerily alike, you’d be right. Because I am so moved by the resurrections I see in progress, I can scarcely preach anything else.

Pete was here the day I arrived in 2005, tall, handsome, wearing his signature doo-rag. He told me he didn't bother to talk to me for awhile because he'd seen pastors come and go. "If you're going to stay, stay," he said. Grumpily.

I vividly remember when he decided to tell me about the day he'd died. We were sitting on the back row during an evening service. And he told me how, on the last day of school when he was 7 years old, someone shouted, "Last one on the bus is a rotten egg."

That certainly wasn't an option, so Pete darted into the street to get on the bus. Instead he was hit by a car and flipped into the air. When EMS arrived, they thought he was dead and placed a sheet over his face.

His mother came running, screaming and promising that if God would spare her baby, she'd quit her drinking and partying and foolishness. And she saw Pete stir beneath the sheet.

He was in a body cast for 10 months, using crutches to walk. Doctors weren't sure he'd ever walk correctly again.

But one evening when his mother returned to the house – not from a party but from Wednesday night Bible study, Pete points out – he didn't have time to retrieve his crutches to get to the door. Like Forrest Gump shedding his leg braces, he walked to the door.

Doctors told him well, OK, he could walk but he couldn't play sports. But he played both football and basketball for the Travelers Rest High Devildogs. The only reason he quit baseball was that pitchers kept hitting him on intentional walks.

When I met Pete, he was a landscaper. But the pay was never consistent and he often didn't have a cell phone to set up appointments. He lived with various aunts and cousins. Then last year he lost his housing entirely, and moved in with some friends from our art room, then into the Greenville Rescue Mission. In February he got his first full-time job – as a cook at The Lost Cajun on Main Street.

It's been a real challenge. The leisurely pace of landscaping did not prepare him for the fast pace of restaurant work. It's hard to remember what goes on the large fish plate and what goes in the shrimp basket. But Pete kept telling himself, "I ain't gonna quit."

Last week I passed by on North Main and saw him in the open kitchen, flipping and frying and grilling, towering above his co-workers. He looked an awful lot like a resurrection in progress.

In the small world we inhabit on this corner, we face poverty and mental illness and mental disability and addiction on a daily basis. We face crises in transportation and affordable housing.

In the large world we inhabit, we face division on a scale we could scarcely have imagined three years ago. We face crises in immigration and pollution and shootings in public places.

How do we keep going in the face of so many failures of civility, of security, of peace-keeping, of a world that seems bent on proving Jesus's teachings to be the ravings of a madman?

We live in a world in which our resurrections are unfinished. Brokenness and sin are stirred into the mix. We're not there yet. We're not nearly there.

Because the resurrection is not the end, but the beginning of our stories.

On a first century morning, a group of grieving disciples were perplexed and then terrified and then amazed to find the empty tomb of their friend.

At first, they had no idea what the emptiness meant. It only dawned on them later in bits and pieces.

I am reminded of the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida, when Jesus put saliva on the man's eyes and he saw men like trees, walking. So Jesus touched his eyes again, and the man saw clearly.

Isn't that how we learn, how we discern? A step here, an attempt there?

Our resurrections are not finished because our lives are not finished. We will keep stumbling after Jesus as he exits that tomb again and again and again.

The question is: How are we going to live into the resurrection? What are we going to do with that magnificent gift, that magnificent freedom, that magnificent opportunity?

We see resurrections in progress as Lois moves to be near family, as Denise sleeps safely off the street, as Pete gets crowned the King of Beignets.

We see resurrections in progress in every addict who gets clean, every homeless person who gets housed, every one of us who moves from self-absorption to caring for our neighbor, every one of us who reaches out a hand to someone else.

Unfinished resurrections, maybe. Resurrections in progress.

But resurrections all the same.

Amen.