

Text: John 20: 19-31  
Title: Practice Resurrection  
Date: 04.08.18  
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Wendell Berry ~ poet-farmer-prophet ~ ends a poem entitled, “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front” with this phrase:

*Practice resurrection.*

Practice resurrection.

I love that phrase, love that idea, love that calling....

With Thomas as my patron saint, I don't always know what to believe about the resurrection but I want to practice resurrection. As one who struggles to hang onto faith I want to embody what I can't always hold. Faith is not just cerebral it's physical. What I can't do with my brain maybe I can do with my body. So....

How do we live into the resurrection?

What does life look like in the light of resurrection morning?

What is a resurrection ethic?

As the resurrection is real, how do we live into its reality?

How do we practice resurrection?

Dear friends, for the next few weeks we're going to look at a few post-resurrection stories with those questions in mind. As the disciples found their footing in a world where death had been defeated, how did they respond? What did they do? What can we learn from those to whom Jesus appeared ~ alive and loose and walking on this earth? How did they practice resurrection?

So, let's consider this morning's story....

The disciples were hiding behind locked doors.

The text says that they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Maybe they were worried that they were next in line for the court and the cross, or they were afraid of being ridiculed for being foolish enough to follow one who was crucified. Maybe they were frightened by the news the women had returned with. If the body was gone, who knew what they should do? Or, maybe they were ashamed of deserting Jesus on Friday.

Whatever it was....

They were hiding.

They weren't out looking for Jesus.

They weren't the courageous or the convicted.

They were what William Willimon calls “the church of sweaty palms, shaky knees, and firmly bolted doors.”

When Jesus slips in among them....

The greeting that Jesus offers could be heard as a common salutation. Except, that he offers it twice and he spoke the same the last time they were together. Before he was betrayed, in that long last conversation between he and his disciples, he promised them peace and the gift of God's Spirit. And in this first post resurrection appearance Jesus fulfills that promise. He blesses them with peace and breathes on them.

But! This is not just Jesus blowing bad resurrected breath on his disciples. The verb used here for breathing is previously used twice in scripture: when God breathes life into Adam and when life is breathed into the dry bones in Ezekiel. This is John's Pentecost. This is Jesus giving his disciples the very Spirit of God. (By the way, Calvin says it's just a spritzer and that full saturation actually comes at Pentecost.)

Jesus gives his disciples peace, breathes on them, and sends them out with a mission.

Don Henley, lead singer for the Eagles and a fine theologian, penned a song that has this chorus:

*I've been trying to get down to the heart of the matter  
But my will gets weak and my thoughts seem to scatter  
But I think it's about forgiveness...forgiveness...  
Even if, even if, you don't love me anymore...*

In this first resurrection appearance Jesus gets down to the heart of the matter, and I think it's about forgiveness, forgiveness.

He doesn't tell them to preach a path to heaven, chide them about faith, or invite their worship. The first and final thing he says to his gathered disciples is about forgiveness. He commissions the timid, the tepid, the trembling and the troubled to proclaim forgiveness.

Years ago, I was on a panel of the family members of murder victims who oppose the death penalty. I participated because I knew that the death of the man who murdered my father would offer no redemption, relief, or requisite revenge. The moderator of the panel was David Kaczynski – the brother who turned in Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber. The discussion was vital and leavened with pathos, but one story was particularly riveting.

Four teenage girls in northwest Indiana, who wanted money to play arcade games, went to the home of the little old lady who taught a neighborhood Bible study. They pretended they wanted to study, but once inside they brutally stabbed the woman and left her for dead on the dining room floor. It was an unspeakable, heinous, violent murder. A year later the fifteen-year-old girl who was the ringleader was sentenced to death.

Bill Pelke, the grandson of the murdered grandmother, was sitting next to me as he told this story. He was gruff, unpolished, and impassioned. He spoke of being completely locked up with anger, vindictive revenge, hatred and racism. And his life was spiraling out of control ~ divorce, alcoholism, bankruptcy, etc.

He was desperate enough that while sitting inside of the cab of a crane at a steel mill in Gary, with tears streaming down his face, he bargained with God for help and promised a life of service in response. He asked for freedom from the rage and heard God pushing open the door of forgiveness. And, Bill began to pray for love for the girl who murdered his grandmother and for compassion for her family.

I sat there stunned.

In making space for forgiveness,  
in seeking after forgiveness,  
in offering forgiveness,

the anger, hatred, and pain that chained his heart began to unlock.

In that crane cab he promised God that he would give his life in service to the freedom that he sought. And, twenty years later after an international campaign and a petition signed by millions, including the Pope, to get that young girl off of death row, Bill Pelke was still giving his life to the death penalty abolition movement.

The key that unlocked his frightened heart was forgiveness.

Now. A good theologian would remind us that what Jesus is getting at in our text is the central mission of the church:

Jesus was crucified and is resurrected.

Sin is paid for and death is defeated.

And now, the church is empowered to proclaim this good news.

As people accept it, their sins are forgiven.

As people reject it, their sins are held....

I am sure that is all fine and dandy. It churns up a familiar comfort, positions us safely in God's fold, and energizes a mission of proclamation. But, what if what's lost in that reading is the call to practice forgiveness?

Consider this....

The commission to forgive sins in our text is an interesting line.

Our translation reads:

*If you forgive the sins of anyone, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.*

Gulp. There's a lot of power there. It reads as if the disciples of Jesus hold the power of forgiveness and condemnation (whatever that means). But, to get to that reading you have to do some translation gymnastics. You have to assume or insert words that are not in the Greek text. A more literal reading might be:

*Of whomever you forgive the sins, they (the sins) are forgiven to them; whomever you hold fast (embrace) they are held fast (embraced).*

Did you hear the difference? In the second conditional clause it's not the sins that are being held it's the person. The traditional reading of the text inserts "sins" into the second conditional clause. As Sandra Schneiders puts it:

*Theologically, and particularly in the context of John's Gospel, it is hardly conceivable that Jesus, sent to take away the sin of the world, commissioned his disciples to perpetuate sin by the refusal of forgiveness or that the retention of sins in some people could affect the universal reconciliation accomplished by Jesus. Grammatically, linguistically, and theologically, the "traditional" reading of John 20:23b as speaking of the retention of sins is unconvincing.*

Whew! That's a lot.

But, the call is to forgive and to embrace the other.

In the same way that Jesus embraces Thomas....

From the very beginning of the Gospel of John the claim is that God in Christ came to take away the sin of the world. That belongs to God alone. But, without getting too hung up on whether or not we have the power to withhold forgiveness, what if we heard in this post-resurrection exchange an ethic of forgiveness?

The desire of Jesus is that his people embody forgiveness.

The will of Jesus is that his followers would be forgivers.

As the universe now swings on a different hinge (resurrection) there is a call to practice forgiveness.

I don't know that we have to broker forgiveness in the horror of a Syrian genocide, or between Palestinians and Hebrews, or that we all need a tear stained conversion in the cab of a crane...

But, I do know that there are people with whom we harbor hurt and there are old wounds that fester and old angers that we can't release. I do know that in our jobs, and in our families and faculties, there are relationships that are shackled with resentment. I do know that sitting in our company this morning there are those who can't let go of the feeling that they were wronged by others in our company. I do know that we easily get tangled up in the knot of victim and vindication.

And therefore...

as the breath of God breathes upon us,

as the resurrected Jesus slips in among us,

could we be those who without first getting even, without waiting for an adequate repentance, without needing to have the last word, can forgive?

In doing so you just might discover that fear and whatever else it is that binds us begins to be unlocked. Lew Smedes says it this way:

*When you forgive you set a prisoner free. And then you discover that the prisoner was you.*

I have no misgivings about the brutal terrain and life-long burden of those who have been abused or are being abused. I have no misgivings about the slow process to unlock those chains. I know that forgiveness is complicated and difficult and takes all sorts of shapes. And, none of this is to suggest that speaking the truth, remembering rightly, and demanding accountability are not part of the journey...

But, as a way to practice resurrection can we forgive?

Can we forgive others?

Can we forgive ourselves?

If on the cross and through the empty tomb sins are forgiven and every vestige of death is defeated then shouldn't we seek to be on the side that triumphs?

If the universe is ultimately not fair, but merciful, let us seek to be on the side of mercy.

If we're all broken and in need of forgiveness let's extend the same to others. Let's be on the side of forgiveness.

Dear friends, as those who practice resurrection let us proclaim forgiveness, but let us also be those who get down to the heart of the matter and forgive liberally and repeatedly.

Even today.

Amen.