

Easter Day Easter Joy:

Sermon given on Easter Sunday 2008 by The Rev. Joe Summers

Lord, let your anointing spirit be among us, that we might come out of our graves and live again. Take our hearts of stone and turn them into living waters and flowing fountains that we might see you, and know you, in our bodies, in our sisters and brothers, in this incredible creation. Amen.

Stories can have enormous power for good and ill. Stories can be a means of opening up our eyes, seeing and experiencing something we couldn't see or experience before. Or they can be a means of keeping us from seeing and experiencing what is right in front of us. This means the more powerful the story, the more we need to be careful in how we tell it. No story has been more important, at least in Western Civilization, than the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. Yet, part of what we've seen so clearly in the 20th Century is that it can be told in a way that helps us to see God in all and everyone as our sisters and brothers, or that blinds us to such realities such that it leaves us thinking that God particularly cares about Christians, or Jews are somehow not our sisters and brothers. So we need to be really careful in how we tell this story.

The New Testament Theologian, N.T. Wright, also says that it may be difficult for us today to experience the power of this story because the Enlightenment has left us preoccupied with questions related to how things happen, often to the exclusion of questions of meaning. But the power of the Easter story is not about how the resurrection happened. Mark will claim Jesus appeared to the disciples, using the same word Paul uses when describing his encounter with the Risen Christ who no one but himself could see. John will go out of his way to say that somehow Jesus resurrection was a physical resurrection. The fact that both gospels were included in the New Testament suggests that the early church was not too concerned about just how it happened and was much more concerned with what the resurrection meant. Yet throughout the country today you'll hear preachers more focused on the how than the meaning of the resurrection, liberal preachers trying to explain how the resurrection could have happened without it's violating the laws of nature, conservative preachers talking about the resurrection at the ultimate proof that faith overcomes the laws of nature. But today I'm hoping we can focus on the meaning of the resurrection.

A week ago, Jesus marched against the gates of hell. Jesus marched against the hell of a purity code that had poor people and sick people, which were the great majority in his society, believing that they were unclean, unacceptable, in God's eyes. Through their response Jesus got the upholders up the purity code to reveal just what a heartless, godless system it was so it lost much of its power over those it had previously subjugated.

Jesus marched against the Temple system, the system through which the religious/political hierarchy of his society legitimated itself by selling forgiveness and reconciliation and revealed that the real temple of God was to be found, not in this morally bankrupt institution, but among those who worshipped in spirit and truth and practiced forgiveness.

Jesus marched to redeem God, from those who had God imprisoned in ideologies of hate, domination, and exclusion, and left us with a lasting image of a God who loves us at all costs.

Knowing how, in our culture, so much of Christianity is playing exactly the same role as the religious ideologies Jesus sought to overthrow--it should cause us to “tremble, tremble, tremble.”

I want to take a brief detour to just reflect for a moment on some of the impact Jesus' vision of non-violent struggle has had on our time. It was his reflections on the way Jesus was able to get the authorities to do the very things that destroyed their legitimacy and opened the door for social change, that was one Mahatma Gandhi's main inspirations. It was in turn, in part, the success of Gandhi's non-violent truth struggles that inspired Martin Luther King. At the end of this week in which we've seen a renewed dialogue about the role of race in our national life, let us not forget that not long before he was killed Martin Luther King announced, that he also was heading to his nations capital to reveal, through a non-violent action campaign, the economic apartheid that rules this nation, the hypocrisy of a nation that claims to believe in life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as a human right-- but which keeps such a large proportion of our population in a state of poverty and most other people in a survival mode.

Like Jesus, Martin Luther King also predicted the price he was going to pay for his actions. Two months before he was killed King went back to his home congregation and preached what was to be the last sermon he ever gave there. It was basically his own eulogy which many at the time felt very inappropriate, even lugubrious. It was only in retrospect that it was clear just how appropriate it was. Then Wednesday April 3rd, the night before he was killed, King gave his last speech in which he declared he had been to the mountaintop and had seen the promised land, the land of freedom and equality, and though he was not likely to get there with us, he had seen that we would. The following day, Thursday April 4th, one week before Maundy Thursday, King was shot at 6:00p.m. His funeral would be five days later on Holy Tuesday.*

But the way the Easter story has challenged the gates of hell, is not just restricted to Jesus' actions to challenge social death in his society and how Jesus acted to redeem people and God, Easter is ultimately a story about how God acted, as the psalm says: “This is the story the Lord has made we will be glad and rejoice in it.”

For while we can see how Jesus arrest, torture and death would lead to the de-legitimation of the authorities and the faith they upheld, it does not explain why those going to the tomb experienced not sadness but joy, not powerlessness but empowerment, not apathy but passion, not hatred but understanding creative redemptive good will for all.

Jesus actions do not explain to us why, the same band of cowardly, hypocritical, weak, self-centered disciples who betrayed Jesus, should suddenly experience the same Holy Spirit that they encountered in Jesus, but which they never possessed before he died, now within them, transforming them, so that, like Jesus, they too became known as incredibly bold, courageous,

imaginative, powerful healers and social change agents.

It is the witness of the transformation of the disciples which is by far the greatest testimony to the resurrection and what it meant because, without that transformation, even if they had claimed Jesus was raised from the dead we would simply hear it as another kind of weird ghost story.

But the Easter story is so much much more than that. It's a story that says that Jesus resurrection was but the beginning of a resurrection that will ultimately include all, all people, all creation. The evidence of this general resurrection is the disciples. And, if this is true, then it is not even enough to go back then to understand what happened to that group of early disciples, the truth of Easter is to be found in the resurrection happening among us today.

Easter Day, Easter Joy: Speaking of this day, in Ezekiel, we hear God say: "I will sprinkle you with clean water, and you shall be clean... from all your idols. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you and you shall be my people and I shall be your God. (Ezekiel 36:24-28)

Easter Day, Easter Joy: The twilight of the idols is passing, the nightmare that happens when we as human beings worship things and become like the things we worship, with eyes but unable to see, with ears but unable to hear, with mouths but unable to speak, with bodies but unable to touch or be touched, with hearts but unable to feel.

Hearts of flesh become hearts of stone when grief, pain, fear, shame, anger, is overwhelming that we become disconnected from our hearts such that they become lifeless. It is a terrible thing to be a heart based creature living without a heart, a feeling based creature but unable to feel, a God-based creature trapped in a world without God, because when we are cut off from our hearts we can no longer see or experience God. Instead, there is only the deadly silence, the silence of disconnection, the silence of meaninglessness.

Easter Day, Easter Joy happens when God breaks open our hearts of stone and gives us hearts of flesh again by breathing into us-- giving us the capacity to feel again--to feel joy and peace even in the midst of this bloody world. That's the mysterious joy of Easter.

Easter Day, Easter Joy means no longer having to live under the dominion of shame, no longer being controlled by our fear of being exposed for making a mistake. Instead we are free to make all the mistakes in the world because we know that ultimately God loves us, affirms us, wants our lives to be about freely loving with all our hearts, bodies, and minds, rather than about living as trying to avoid mistakes.

Easter Day, Easter Joy means no longer living under the dominion of fear. Yes we will still have great fears, but they will no longer dictate our lives. We will no longer live terrified by

death, or even hell, because we've been there, we've been baptized into it, and yet behold we live.

Easter Day, Easter Joy means no longer being the possession of feelings and experiences, or being the possession of others, because nothing in all creation, not the past, nor the present, nor the future, can keep us from knowing the love of God we find in Christ Jesus.

Easter Day, Easter Joy: God is calling us back to life, back to joy, back to courage, back to connection--even in the midst of a world where the most terrible things happen. Let us wake from the nightmarish sleep of illusion, domination, addiction, hard heartedness and reclaim our selves, our lives, our world.

To hell with hell. That's the Spirit of Easter's message. To hell with life lived under the dominion of isolation and death. To hell with domination and all the ideologies that support it. To hell with exclusion and all the good reasons we come up with to justify it. No more life lived trying to get our hearts to accept the unacceptable. No more trying to squeeze ourselves to fit into unjust inhuman systems. No more feeling like we've got to live from the outside in in order to survive.

Easter Day, Easter Joy: Instead of empty hearts, hearts broken open, fountains of living water springing up within us, life lived with a zest that wakes us up in the morning with an excitement to be alive, life abundant overflowing, a mighty flood welling up within us and pouring out to overrun run the dikes and barriers that would keep us from being connected to ourselves, to each other, and to God.

Easter Day, Easter joy-- singing out-- I am God's beloved, You are God's beloved, no one and no thing can take that away from us.

Easter Day, Easter Joy shouting out within us: freedom is coming, freedom is coming, yes I know! Yes, I know! The day of the Lord has come, the time of God's endless Jubilee. No more living as slaves

Easter Day, Easter Joy: creation, our bodies, our sexuality, no longer seen as the enemy, but part of the means through which we know ourselves as beloved of God and love and are loved.

Easter Day, Easter joy: no more putting others down to raise ourselves up as all are now being raised up, and heaven is big enough for all.

Easter Day, Easter Joy: he changed the rock that was my heart into fountains of living water.

Easter Day, Easter Joy: the Kingdom of heaven, the reign of heaven on earth here and now.

Easter Day, Easter Joy, let us be baptized into this story and reborn in and through it, so that we

and all things might be made new. And if we are willing, God is ready, and if we are ready God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.

**While Martin Luther King's death is normally seen as an assassination, it may have been something much closer to an execution for there are many hints of some kind of official collaboration in his death. There was an FBI orchestrated Media campaign to embarrass King out of the exclusive Rivermont Holliday Inn where he was staying into the black owned, but more vulnerable, Lorraine Motel. There was the 11th hour transfer of the black Memphis police detective who had been assigned to duty at the fire station across from the Lorraine Motel and the reassignment of two of the black firemen in that station. There was the withdrawal of police officers from the neighborhood not long before the shooting. There was the cutting down of the trees that would have obscured the ability of James Earl Ray to see the balcony within days afterwards. All this seems to reflect the degree to which "the powers" have learned that public executions are not in their best interest.*