

Resurrection is About Heart, Us, and Invitation

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Easter Sunday, March 30, 2024

St. David's Episcopal Church, Wayne

Mark 16:1-8

the green of Jesus/is breaking the ground/and the sweet/smell of delicious Jesus/is opening the house and/the dance of Jesus music/has hold of the air and/the world is turning/in the body of Jesus and/the future is possible

Lucille Clifton's buoyant poem "spring song" is the perfect way to welcome all of you to Easter! We at St. David's have been waiting for this moment – for the pop, beauty, and joyousness of this day – a day that is about heart, about us, and about a renewed hopefulness for a future that is possible, possible all because Jesus rose from the dead and saved us all. We've been waiting for you to gather and breathe life into today's celebration. Welcome to this holy place on this holy day.

There are three things I want to offer about Easter, about the gift of Resurrection, that we mark and sing and celebrate. And I hope you will listen, because there's going to be a little quiz at the end. Here are your Cliff Notes at the outset: Resurrection is about 1) **heart**, 2) **us**, and 3) **invitation**.

Clifton's poem is so perfect for Easter because it is ALL **heart** – a pulsating feeling of openness, joy, and fluidity – a kind of no-holds-barred, the world-is-my-oyster kind of vibe. And that's Easter – all heart. If you read the Gospel accounts of the empty tomb, every single response to the empty tomb is an emotional response. The women, upon discovering the empty tomb are afraid, then amazed and joyful. They tell the disciples who respond with doubt then shock then jubilation, then uncertainty again, then back to joy. In John's Gospel account even *more* emotions reveal themselves: Mary's grief and confusion finding Jesus' body gone, then recognition of Jesus (who she thought was the gardener), then relief and then a clinging with a little dash of desperation. The disciples, hiding in the Upper Room, are frightened, then amazed and then, at Jesus' appearance - doubtful, and then – they receive a deep and abiding peacefulness.

And in John's Gospel everyone seems to be *running*, too. Mary *runs* to tell Simon Peter and the other disciple. The two disciples *run* to the tomb, and the Gospeler is quick to tell us that the other disciple "*outruns*" Peter. After seeing the risen Christ, Mary *runs* to tell the others. I don't know about you – but I run when the reptilian, survival part of my brain takes over and I'm running for my perceived life (like, one time, from a diamond-backed snake in northern Michigan, and another time, at Victoria Falls National Park in South Africa, from a Vervet monkey). That's running *away*. It's an emotional, sympathetic nervous-system response. Running *toward* is also feeling-motivated, inspired by the deepest kind of love – like running toward a loved one in the airport after a long separation. You just can't wait to get to them, and walking will not do. Running reflects emotion, and there's a lot of it in our Easter stories.

It's important to note that there is *nothing* in the resurrection stories about the head, or logic, or the intellect (and believe me, I looked!). Not one person stops the action and wonders how these occurrences will piece together into a tidy systematic theology. Not one person wonders how the crumpled clothes on the tomb floor or the reappearance of Jesus in dazzling white squares with the

Hebrew Scriptures, or fulfills the teachings of the prophets, or how the scribes or the Pharisees might interpret the resurrection in their temple sermons. Not one person stops to think about the ramifications of the bread and the wine as symbols or transubstantiation or liturgical theology or what to include in a creed. Not one person stops to think. All they can do in the face of the fierce and beautiful truth that Jesus is alive again – is to emote. Because remember – they loved Jesus. They had given up everything for Jesus. Jesus was family, their closest loved one, the center of their hearts, their reason for life. God raised Jesus from the dead – there to touch and see, not hanging on a cross, but shining and vibrant and whole – and the only possible, the only sensible, response was pure, unfiltered emotion. Alleluia! Thank God. Love wins.

We do well, I believe, when presenting ourselves for Easter worship to take our cue from those who were there. We do well to resist the natural urge to over-complicate, over-intellectualize, over-think. We're so good at that. But if we're honest, there isn't much room for over-analyzing in the face of resurrection – and maybe doing so is even an avoidance of allowing ourselves to feel the full impact of what God has done for us in raising Jesus. Even more than that, it doesn't escape my attention that the whole spiritual process, the deepening of our Christian faith and practice, is about slowly moving our day-to-day orientation from our heads to our hearts in what we do and say. The gift of resurrection is the central idea of Christian faith – everything hinges on it – and in the end, it is all – and completely – about **heart**.

Secondly, Easter, and resurrection, is about **us**. To quote our favorite theologian Richard Rohr: “The message of Easter is not primarily a message about Jesus’ body, although we’ve been trained to limit it to this one-time ‘miracle.’ We’ve been educated to expect a lone, risen Jesus saying, ‘I rose from the dead; look at me!’...Let me share what I think the real message of [our faith] is: *Every message about Jesus is a message about all of us, about humanity*. Sadly, the Western church that most of us were raised in emphasized the individual resurrection of Jesus. It was a miracle that we [can] neither prove nor experience, but...[are asked] to boldly believe.”

But there's a great secret, at least for us Western Christians, hidden in the other half of Christianity – in the Eastern Orthodox Church – that portrays the resurrected Jesus not by himself, but surrounded by crowds of people. Yesterday several of us gathered here at St. David's to think about the gift and meaning of Holy Saturday – that day Jesus, as the tradition tells us – descended to Hades to free the dead and raise them with him. Hades is not the same as hell, although over time we have melded those two words together to mean the same thing, but they are not. Hades, at least in our Christian tradition, is simply the place of the dead, where it was believed the soul went after death, with no punishment or judgment involved, to wait for God. Together we looked at paintings and images from as far back as 400 CE, of Jesus, after his death, descending down to claim every, last person who had preceded him in death, to raise them up with him. The message? In resurrection, Jesus comes for us to bring us, at the last, to God. We are *all* saved – not just Jesus. Jesus' resurrection is a promise for all of us, and for everyone who has gone before us. In raising Jesus, God promises that each of us will enjoy a similar joy, that at our last we will be delivered into the waiting arms of God, surrounded by the fullness of love, forever and then some. Easter is an announcement of a common hope. When we sing in the Easter hymn that Christ destroyed death, that means the death of all of us. It's not just about Jesus, it's to humanity that God promises, ‘Life is not ended, it merely changed.’ Resurrection is about **us**.

And finally, resurrection is an **invitation** – and by this I mean, an invitation to a way of living our earthly lives. We are known to say that we, as Christians, are a “resurrection people.” By that I think

we mean that we strive to live our lives in the hope of resurrection, that we work hard to trust God's promises, that we believe that we are deeply loved by God and worthy, that we know that God is more powerful than death, that God turns all of our crucifixions into resurrection, that in God love triumphs over everything, that "in the end, everything will be okay and if it's not okay – it's not the end." The **invitation** of resurrection is to live our lives - our daily, quotidian lives - as if we really and truly believe these promises. But it is a *choice* – something, if we want to live this way, at which we work. "We are not so at home with the resurrected form of things despite a yearly springtime, healings in our bodies, the ten thousand forms of newness in every event and every life. The death side of things grabs our imagination and fascinate us as fear and negativity always do, I am sad to say. We have to be taught how to look for anything infinite, positive, or good, which for some reason is much more difficult."

This past year the Minnesota Institute of Art hosted an exhibit of paintings by Vincent Van Gogh which he created during his one year confined to an asylum at Saint-Paul-de-Mausole after suffering his most serious psychological episode since infamously cutting off part of his ear. The paintings were stunning – but the most compelling part of the exhibit was a small, framed photo off to the side – the view from Van Gogh's cell, through the bars, out into the countryside. Here he was, with the weight of misery, the deepest depression, the most miserable of circumstances pressing down on him. From that oppression of mental illness, he had the wherewithal to gaze past those bars, past his own crucifixion, out into the beauty of the world, the hope of creation. It's been said that we see what we look for – and in that deepest, darkest place, Van Gogh chose to see resurrection, or, at least, the hope of it. He didn't deny his pain, or avoid it, or refuse to attend to it. But somewhere inside himself, in that place where only God resides, he chose to see the future that was possible, and from that place created many of his most glorious works. What if – what if – we accepted this invitation, and chose to live this way, too?

On this glorious day, in this stunningly beautiful church we sing our hymns and pray our praise for the gift of resurrection. We do so because (here's your quiz) resurrection is about 1) **heart**, 2) **us**, and 3) **invitation**. May the Risen Christ be with you this day and always. Christ is Risen! Alleluia!

Sources:

Lucille Clifton, "spring song" from *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton*.

A recording of Clifton reading her poem is here:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54587/spring-song-56d2351b45223>

Richard Rohr, "A Feast of Hope," <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/a-feast-of-hope-2022-04-17/>

The quote "in the end everything will be okay, and if it's not okay, it's not the end" is from Brazilian writer and journalist Fernando Sabino (1923–2004).

Richard Rohr, Center for Action and Contemplation daily e-mail, Holy Week 2024.