

Year A, Easter Sunday

April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017

### **The Resurrection; the Setting Loose of Viral Love**

At first thought, I find it difficult to explain the importance of the resurrection in terms other than assurance of life after death and yet that explanation seems thin to me. Is there a larger meaning to the resurrection? I think we will find our answer if we stick with Peter's sermon recorded in Acts 10.

In Peter's world you were either a Roman citizen or you were second class and subject to being harassed, detained and even killed if the state thought it best. It was just the way it was and this "reality," as far as Rome was concerned, went all the way back to the gods who founded Rome and gave it the power and superiority it now enjoyed. In fact, its power and superiority were proof that the gods had blessed it from the beginning.

This was the world everyone lived in and challengers were publically crucified and their corpses left hanging as a warning to others. The Romans crucified thousands and thousands of people. It was the cruel underbelly of "Pax Romana."

In addition to the divisions between citizens and non-citizens of Rome, there were the divisions between the nations Rome had overpowered and they each were in rivalry with all the others. The wealthier provinces saw themselves as superior to their less wealthy neighbors and their wealth justified their superiority. Their neighbors envied their wealth and wanted it for themselves. They would take it if they could but Roman power prevented them. This too was part of the "Pax Romana."

In this context let's revisit Peter's discovery. Remember Peter had been a fisherman who thinks like everybody else thinks until he encounters Jesus. After his encounter his mind had been in a slow process of conversion as he keeps seeing new implications to the prophetic message Jesus lived.

Peter says, "I really am learning that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another." Do you see how radical this is? Prior to this developing awareness Peter assumed God blessed some and cursed others. It was the same assumption that Rome and the rest of the world used to organize themselves. But if God shows no partiality the world order is threatened. Rome can't claim superiority if God shows no partiality. If God shows no partiality even Peter's supposed Jewish superiority disappears.

Peter says "In every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right, (namely respect their neighbor,) is acceptable to him." With Jesus peace is not coerced by the threat of violence but exists as a by-product of worshipping Jesus Christ.

The words "whoever worships him" catch my attention. What does Peter mean? I think he means putting Jesus at the center of our attention and relationship system. He becomes the

hub through which every other relationship flows, even our closest ones. For example, with Jesus at the center of our identity we find ourselves open and wanting the best for the whole world. Instead of being solely citizens of the United States, defined by its agenda, we find ourselves citizens of the world at a deeper level. That's our identity but it's not the world's way and it wasn't the way of the world Peter was born into either. Peter is laying out an alternative to Rome and violence.

Peter then launches a review of events leading to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. It started in Galilee after his baptism by John. It continued as Jesus, "anointed with the Holy Spirit and endowed with power, traveled around Galilee doing good and healing everyone oppressed by the devil because God was with him."

This sentence enchants me. To be anointed by the Holy Spirit means being touched and filled with God's Spirit of non-rivalry and love. This has meaning particularly when we put it in contrast with our own spirits. We humans are caught in conflicts bred into us from the beginning of our lives; conflicts we are so used to, we don't even recognize them; we think of them as part of our personality. But what happens when the non-violent and non-rivalrous Jesus enters the tangle of conflicts we call ourselves? The oils of peace begin spreading and old points of tension dissipate. This effect is the power with which Jesus is endowed.

The power Jesus was given is the power to free us from bondage to the other. I believe we are far more connected to each other than we know. I believe we need connection and cannot live without it. But I also believe some of our connections, both current and past, are quite destructive. They keep us in bondage. Jesus wants to free us and give us new connections that nurture us and bring light to our world.

Jesus comes from a place of absolute health, no distortion, no guile, and no negative agenda. Inhabited by the Holy Spirit he is able to be solely for the other. Everyone he touches is made better by it.

When Peter speaks of "the devil" I think he is talking about the mechanism of transferring blame and responsibility from one person to another. Usually the problem moves from the powerful to the vulnerable so the vulnerable have to deal with it even though they didn't cause it. This little move sounds like the devil to me. The devil is not a being in competition with God but a human process of burden shifting. Those who wind up carrying the weight feel oppressed but often don't know where their oppression comes from.

When we are in this place of bondage it's easy to say there is something wrong with me. I guess I am just bad. I guess I am a depressed person or an alcoholic, or a person who is chronically ill. Maybe I have a bad personality; I can't love, it's my fault and I don't know how to fix it. These are the people Jesus healed because God was with him.

The truth is we are all, in varying measure, oppressed by "the devil" and each of us has done our share of oppressing. We do it automatically and chronically as our encounter with Jesus slowly changes us.

Peter says, “We are witnesses of everything he did, both in Judea and in Jerusalem.” While he was on earth he did a majority of his good work in Galilee and Judea. Then he went to Jerusalem and finished his work. There “they killed him by hanging him on a tree.”

When a human anointed with the Holy Spirit and endowed with power, who uses that power for the good of all, appears, they kill him by hanging him on a tree. You can't have someone revealing how the world works. They are dangerous people. Their goodness, their being for the other, their recognition that God shows no partiality makes them dangerous. We hang them on a tree to kill their influence and to discourage others from following them. Death is the final answer and our greatest weapon—the mother of all threats and we detonate it on Jesus. That ought to take care of the threat. Right!?

“But God raised him up on the third day and allowed him to be seen, not by everyone but by us. We are witnesses whom God chose beforehand, who ate and drank with him after God raised him from the dead.”

He really was dead but God raised him up. He didn't just awaken from a coma after a near death experience. He was dead! We emptied our power into him and killed him but God raised him up. Now what do we do to contain this virus of Good News? Our most potent weapon has proven ineffective. Do you see the importance of the resurrection? It shows us God's power of life is greater than the power of death.

The virus of Good News, this contagion that sets things right, this undistorting that allows for light, laughter and joy is spreading. The one who prayed “Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing” is now our judge. Could there be better news! Amen.