

Reflections on the Spirituality of Resurrection

(Rev. Peggy McDonagh, May 5, 2019)

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the Lenten season we explored how we might reconnect with an unhurried God, examining the busyness of our lives and discerning ways to find more time for ourselves, others and for God. Now we are in the Season of Easter, and I am wondering how we might get off the treadmill that is life and connect with the spiritually renewing message of resurrection. In Spring, despite the snow, we witness the process of transformation changing the barrenness of the landscape. I wonder how we can water the barrenness of the landscape of our inner life, so caught up are we in the rush of life? How do we experience resurrection, how do we let it be reflected in our lives? Does it really make a difference?

I believe that the spiritual message of resurrection can change the sometimes barren reality of our inner lives so that our external lives become visible signs of God's love, a love that we must experience and share so that people can see that something different is possible, that we can be transformed into a new way of being and living.

David E. Elkins writes that spiritual resurrection reconnects us with the sacred and fills us with a born-again passion for life. Spiritual renewal awakens us so that we might experience a softer, more authentic way of being and living. Spiritual teachers have long taught and encouraged people to awaken to their own power and potential to love unconditionally. In recognizing the transforming power and potential of hearts healed by love, Jesus often challenged the narrow perceptions of life, religion, and authority of those who held a rather highly regarded sense of self.

For those who had hearts open to receive and a willingness to learn, Jesus empowered them to awaken to their own ability to be compassionate and authentic. Resurrection is about the heart awakening; awakening to one's own right to an unhurried life, to a renewed way of being and acting in the world, and to a life that demonstrates God's love, enabling us to burst forth into new life that is rich with hopefulness, reverence, integrity and optimism.

The German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote, "We must always change, renew, rejuvenate ourselves; otherwise we harden." Spring is the right time for renewal and rejuvenation: an opportunity to soften. This day invite your heart to break open as you witness the call of spring, see the signs of resurrection, and respond to the call of renewal, within you.

REFLECTION I

READING Hebrews 6:19 (adapted)

“[Now] we have this [hope] as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, it cannot slip, and it cannot break down under whoever steps out upon it. Hope is an unbreakable spiritual lifeline, reaching past all appearances right to our inner shrine in which the very presence of God resides.

HOPE

Hope resides in the messages of Easter and spring. What does it mean to hold on to hope in a world overwhelmed by violence, hatred, greed, poverty, disease, natural disasters, and environmental problems? For a myriad of reasons many adults and young people find it challenging to be hopeful. Yet, the alternatives, fear, anxiety, pessimism, and despair are not bearable responses to the challenges of life.

In the Christian Testament, the word hope is defined as an anchor which holds us fast to our faith no matter what the circumstances of life. Scripture suggests that because God dwells within the inner sanctuary of our humanity, it follows that God is present always in the messiness of life, no matter how daunting, miserable, or terrifying it may get. Hope is our spiritual lifeline to the strength of God within. We are never alone; God is with us.

Perhaps the Great Creator fashioned hope and placed it in nature so that we could learn from creation about the power and steadfastness of it. In his short story, *A River Runs Through It* Norman Maclean beautifully articulates this.

“When I looked, I knew I might never again see so much of the earth so beautiful, the beautiful being something you know...added to something you see, a whole that is different from the sum of its parts. What I saw might have been just another winter scene, although an impressive one. But what I knew was that the earth underneath was alive and that by tomorrow, certainly by the day after, it would be all green again. So, what I saw because of what I knew was a kind of death with the marvelous [hope] of a less than a three-day resurrection.”

One might imagine that after Jesus died, Mary felt as if she had entered the darkness of hell. Many people understand the hopelessness and misery that often accompany the death of a loved one or other losses that change our world from what it used to be. Yet, hope is often hidden

within the murky depths of dark places. Mary, weeping at the tomb, experiences the terrible darkness of grief. Suddenly Jesus calls her by name, and her night turns into day; she is surprised by the hope-filled message that awakened within her telling her that her life had meaning and purpose.

One woman recalls her struggle with cancer. People would tell her everything was alright, but she knew that was not true. She thought that hope had run out for her. In an interview, she spoke about what hope came to mean for her. "Becoming hopeful doesn't mean getting back to the place I used to be in, when 'everything is all right.' Hope is finding an occasion for joy among the moments of sorrow. Hope is active, affirming the possibility that healing has already begun. I know now that I cannot live without hope."

In his article 'Cultivating Hope', John C. Maxwell writes, "In this age of what for many of us is an endurance test of stress and uncertainty, remember: all of life can be used by the divine to reconnect us with one another, creation, and the deepest part of who we are. So, 'in the face of overwhelming odds, we're left with only one option: to let hope guide us, support us, pave for us a way into each day no matter what it may bring.'" Let the power of hope be resurrected in your heart this spring.

ANTHEM

Amen and Amen

REFLECTION II

READING Romans 12:3

I warn everyone among you not to estimate and think of himself more highly than he ought [not to have an exaggerated opinion of his own importance]

DO NOT TAKE THINGS PERSONALLY

In his insightful book entitled, *The Four Agreements*, Don Miguel Ruiz discusses agreements that we can make with ourselves so we can experience peace and well-being. One essential agreement is not to take things personally. When we take things personally, we become distressed and preoccupied and often turn on ourselves and others with anger and judgment.

The main reason why we cannot "let things go," but take them personally is that we get caught up in focusing on ourselves. We become hypersensitive to the behaviors of others as if their behavior has something to do with "me." As one writer put it: "Personal importance, or taking things

personally, is the maximum expression of selfishness because we assume that everything is about 'me.' "

Paul articulates this state of mind when he tells people not to think too highly of themselves or have an exaggerated opinion about themselves. When people lash out at us, put us in uncomfortable positions, judge us, or do something of which we do not approve, our highly regarded sense of self, the big ego, responds negatively because the big ego is "all about me."

"Even when a situation seems very personal," writes Ruiz, "even if others insult you directly, it has nothing to do with you. What people say, what they do, and the opinions they give are according to the agreements they have in their own minds of how the world should work and about how people should behave. Nothing other people do is because of you. It is because of themselves.

All people live in their own dream, in their own mind." No other person, no matter how close you may be, can know you fully. People can only have a perception of who they think you are and who they think you are of judge you as, is not who you are authentically. Every person lives in a "completely different mind world from the one you live in. When we take something personally, we assume that others know what is in our world, and we try to impose our world on their world."

Take nothing personally, advises Ruiz. "Just like you, other people have pressures and grief in their lives, they have known sadness, suffering, and despair, they are learning about life, and they are seeking happiness. When we allow people to be as they are without taking their judgments, criticisms, and opinions personally, we can never be hurt by what they say or do." Resurrect your heart this spring by not taking things personally.

Ephesians 4: 26-32

We are part of the same body. Don't go to bed angry and do not give evil a chance. If you are a thief, quit stealing. Be honest and work hard so you will have something to give to people in need. Stop all your demeaning talk and slander. Say the right thing at the right time and help others out by what you say. Don't make God's spirit sad. Stop your bitterness and anger and being mad at others. Do not yell at one another or curse each other or ever be rude. Instead, be kind and tender-hearted, and forgive others, just as God has forgiven you.

REVERENCE

When we are disrespectful and arrogant, we are sending a message that we consider ourselves to be more precious than others and consequently, we are unable to value other people. An inability to appreciate another person is visible when we curse a competitor, de-empower another person, judge, criticize and mistreat others. Disrespect and intolerance give us permission to dehumanize, devalue, and hate.

Paul and Jesus understood the importance of respect and open-mindedness. Paul's words to the Ephesians clearly articulate his awareness of the human behavior that can damage others. Jesus' inclusive ministry attested to his reverence for others. He respected people of all ages, status, class, ill or well. He understood that God lived in each person and therefore he demonstrated a respectful reverence for all people, and he counseled others to do the same by giving them a new commandment to love God and others wholly and unconditionally.

Reverence means that we value others and acknowledge God's presence within them with no thought of color, ethnicity, race, religion or sexual orientation. It shows itself through words that rise from honesty, kindness, and acceptance and actions that are just and compassionate. A resurrected heart honors the sacred within ourselves and others.

READING: Luke 12: 22-28

I tell you, do not worry about your life and what you will eat, or about your body and what you will wear. For life is more than food and the body more than clothing. Notice the ravens: they do not sow or reap; they have neither storehouse nor barn, yet God feeds them. How much more valuable are you than birds! Can any of you by worrying add a moment to your lifespan? If even the smallest things are beyond your control, why are you anxious about the rest? Notice how the flowers grow. They do not toil or spin. But I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of them. If God so clothes the grass in the field that grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will God not much more provide for you?

OPTIMISM

There is an ancient proverb that says, "To everyone is given the key to heaven; the same key opens the gates of hell."

When we examine our world and our lives, it can be easy to fall victim to pessimism. I remember in the weeks after my mother's accident a dark cloud of gloom hovered over her. Optimism and hope became shadows in the darkness. Life's circumstances and painful realities can get us down,

mire us in worry, stress, and sadness. Pessimism opens the gates to hell. Optimism opens the gate to heaven.

The dictionary defines optimism as a disposition or tendency to look on the more favourable side of events or conditions and to expect the most favourable outcome, the belief that good ultimately predominates, and the belief that goodness pervades reality.

On one website I read the following: "Optimists tend to make lemonade out of lemons, and then to see the glass as half-full when it's half-empty. Optimism is an admirable quality, one that can positively affect mental and physical health, because it interprets situations in the best possible light."

This past week when I informed Michael Hope that we had sold only 10 tickets for his concert he responded saying, "It's good to know that at least 10 people are coming!" I told him I appreciated his optimism.

I don't know about you, but I prefer to be around optimists rather than pessimists. I find it draining to be in the presence of a negative person, someone who rarely has anything nice to say, and is just plain miserable.

People in the early church were optimistic despite all the challenges they faced. They took Jesus' words seriously when he said, "I tell you, do not worry about your life and what you will eat, or about your body and what you will wear. Can any of you by worrying add a moment to your lifespan?"

At the age of 85, Nadine Stair composed a poem depicting how she would live more optimistically if she had her life to live over. Here is part of that poem: "If I had my life to live over, I would limber up. I would be sillier than I have been this trip. I would take fewer things seriously. I would take more chances. I would take more trips. I would climb more mountains and swim more rivers. I would eat more ice cream and fewer beans. I would perhaps have more actual troubles, but I would have fewer imaginary ones. If I had my life to live over, I would start barefoot earlier in the spring and stay that way later in the fall. I would go to more dances. I would ride more merry-go-rounds. I would pick more daisies."

No matter your age or your struggle let optimism be resurrected within your heart this spring.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I leave you with a quote by Pastor Mark Harris: "Is the resurrection real? If we believe in a creative power that shatters the icy tomb of winter with the life-giving miracle of spring, we have seen a

resurrection. If we believe in a creative power which moves tens and then tens of thousands of people to cry against the injustices of society, enabling the downfall of hatred and prejudice, then we have created a resurrection. If we believe in a creative power within each human breast which enables us to break the bonds of personal pain and know the hope of new tomorrows, then we have experienced resurrection." May this be so for us all.

HYMN In the Bulb there is a flower

vs. 2 & 3 VU #703