

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Sunday, March 27, 2016
Remember His Words

Today's Old Testament text from the prophet Isaiah is paired with today's New Testament text from the Gospel of Luke since both of them speak of a kind of resurrection. In Luke it is the account of Jesus's resurrection that we celebrate today on Easter Sunday. In Isaiah, it is the prophecy of a new creation. Isaiah says: "*For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth...*" (Isaiah 65: 17a). Biblical commentator, Carlos F. Cardoza-Orlandi, connects the two texts in this way: "*While many believers circumscribe the resurrection (of Jesus) to life after death, the prophet reminds us that resurrection is God's power to create a new reality for all creation.*"¹

What might this message mean for us today? Do we even dare to not only believe in, and bear witness to, the reality of the physical resurrection of Jesus, but also do we dare to imagine that God has the power to change our very reality; to imagine that resurrection is possible in our lives today; to imagine what new reality that will happen in our lives tomorrow could be different, than it would have been, because of the message of resurrection that we hear today?

Both our texts also contain a reference to remembering words. Luke says that Mary had to be reminded by the men in dazzling clothes of these words of Jesus: "*The Anointed One must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.*" (Luke 24: 7). How many times had Mary heard Jesus prophecy these words, yet she did not remember his words. Our Isaiah text says: "*...the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.*" (Isaiah 65 17b). Commentator Cardoza-Orlandi interprets this verse in this way: "*God delights in creating a new space, a new context, a new Jerusalem. The old space, the old Jerusalem, is not to be remembered. The new Jerusalem is full of joy.*"² Isaiah is prophesying that the new earth he imagines is so profoundly joyful, so profoundly just for all God's creation that there is no need to remember the former things.

Can we imagine our lives being full of joy because we experience resurrection today? Could our life as a faith community be full of joy because we experience resurrection today. What else might we imagine God calling us to be in our new reality?

Our text from Isaiah imagines a new reality where justice prevails: no weeping or cry of distress; no infant that lives but a few days; we will inhabit the houses we build; we will eat fruit from our vineyard; and God will answer us before we call. We know all too well that this new reality still does not exist for much of the world today.

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.

² Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.

Commentator O. Benjamin Sparks, states this issue in this way: *“What does Easter—beyond personal resurrection and the promise of eternal life—have to do with justice? This text invites us to declare that resurrection has become the key to understanding justice and restoration as God’s way in a tortured world... With the resurrection of Jesus from death, God has answered definitively, before we called. God has spoken with finality, while we were standing at the tomb in doubt and fear”*³

Turning to today’s New Testament text, I was struck by the fact that, no one – not Mary, not any of the disciples, not those who had experienced his healings, not any of those who witnessed the miracles he performed, not those who had heard the Sermon on the Mount or other teachings, not those who followed him from region to region, not those who processed with him into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday – no one came to the tomb expecting to see a resurrected Jesus. The evidence in all the gospels including our text today from Luke, no one remembered his words. No one remembered the words he spoke many times in our Lukan story – that he would be betrayed, crucified and on the third day rise from the dead.

Biblical commentator, Carlos F. Cardoza-Orlandi, says: *We did not expect resurrection. The women were on their way with spices and ointments to minister to the corpse of Jesus. Things were as they had always been: the powerful crushing the innocent; the fearful finding a scapegoat to assuage their anxiety about social upheaval and persecution; and the energetic followers running away at the moment of crisis...We did not expect resurrection...*⁴

This text from Luke offers us powerful testimony - testimony to the experience of resurrection. The Easter story does not end with the testimony of the stories at the empty tomb, but the testimony, which we will hear in the coming weeks of the Easter Season – comprised of the 50 days between today and Pentecost Sunday – the further testimony of the appearances of the risen Christ. He is risen! Hallelujah!

We also have the testimony of believers and of the church throughout more than 2000 years. I am often in awe, when I contemplate the effect of the Christian church on the world. As we hear these testimonies, let us consider the ways in which it is now our obligation to continue this story – to become testifiers – here in the Edina Morningside neighborhood.

As you know, all four gospel accounts of the encounter at the empty tomb vary in some details. They varied as to how many women were involved, who wore dazzling clothes and exactly where things were located inside the tomb and outside the tomb. They vary because they are testimonies. They give testimony as to the resurrected Jesus rather than concerning themselves with factual proof of the resurrection.

³ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.

⁴ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.

Greg Carey, Professor of New Testament at Lancaster Theological Seminary, wrote a blog for the Huffington Post this week entitled “Luke’s Interpretation of Jesus’ Death”. He says: *“...Luke interprets Jesus’ death as a continuation of his ministry. Quite early in (Luke’s) story, Jesus identifies himself as bringing the reign of God through his acts of healing and liberation, his teaching ministry, and the community that forms around him. He shares that these activities will eventually lead to the cross. In his last hours Jesus continues this ministry by seeking blessing for other people rather than calling attention to himself...Jesus dies as a consequence of his commitment to bless all people, especially the poor and sinners. He continues these activities even on the cross. And his resurrection vindicates him as the world’s savior who brings God’s presence to humankind.”*⁵ Jesus dies as a consequence of his commitment to bless all people, especially the poor and sinners. We are called to remember his words. We are called to be testifiers. As stated in our church’s Vision Statement, “we are called to joyously rise to the challenge of living Jesus Christ’s example.”

In the account of the empty tomb from the Gospel of John – which we read for this morning’s Easter Sunrise Service, John gives witness to the encounter in the garden between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Mary recognized Jesus, not when she first saw him, but when he said her name, “Mary”. It is in an intimate encounter with Jesus that causes Mary to believe in the resurrected Jesus.

We are present here today, at the empty tomb, because we desire, once again, to hear our name spoken by Jesus. We desire to be embraced by God’s loving presence. We desire to not be alone. We desire to believe more fully. We desire to be in communion with other believers. Easter Sunday is the day in which many flock to our churches with this desire. Let us rejoice in this response to the empty tomb. Let us pray that every person who comes to a Christian church this Easter Sunday hears their name.

What is it that we are seeking today? It is my deepest hope that each of us, today, might have a deep personal encounter with the resurrected Jesus. We are called today to be witnesses to the resurrection, to be personally transformed, to live transformed lives and to seek to be the loving and caring hands of God reaching out to all who are in need. The world is still in great need. Our testimony needs to be heard. Our actions need to demonstrate our beliefs and seek to bring justice into the God’s world. May we remember Jesus’s words to love one another. Thanks be to God for this Easter Sunday. Amen.

⁵ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/greg-carey/lukes-interpretation-of-jesus-death_b_9517668.html