

SERMON: PRACTICING RESURRECTION: WEAVING TOGETHER DEATH AND LIFE

April 17, 2016

It was the summer of 2001. It was, in many ways, near the end of our innocence – well, the end of our ignorance. And it was the beginning of something for me. I was in a majestic town on a lake. It was Erie, Pennsylvania. The waters known to the Edmond Fitzgerald. The land known to third-tier undergraduate institutions. The county to which Ohioans from the dry side of the line would flock to buy beer.

It was magical. It was the summer of my seventeenth year, and I fell in love. You know how it is – at least I hope you do, or you will. And if you don't or you haven't, then I imagine you've been much more productive in your life that I have been. Or than I was that summer.

And then, at that time, the summer ended. I had to go back to my hometown outside of Pittsburgh. Back to high school. Back to the people who didn't understand that something incredible had just happened. And for the year that followed, I spent most of my time going back to my childhood sweetheart, who lived on the other side of the great and long state of Pennsylvania. And each time I took that bus home, each time it dropped me off at the mall near my parents' house, I would look around at the world that was no longer in techno-color, and I would say, "What am I doing here?"

Peter, what are you doing?

"Peter, what are you doing here?" That's a line that's not in the text, but it should be. Because after all, she wakes up, and there he is Peter. Why is the founder of the church sitting on her bed?

And Peter, really, what *are* you doing here? That is, did he come expecting that Tabitha could rise? Or did you come, simply to grieve, simply to mourn this saint of the church? But somewhere along the way, he just thought, "Hey, I wonder if I could..." And then he asks them to clear the room.

That is, this all feels a little bit like shooting from the hip for me. And so it makes me wonder if Tabitha's resurrection is really at the heart of the story, because as a saint she's already bound for glory.

I think the key of the story is Peter, who is not quite a saint yet.

You may remember that we began with Peter, actually. On my first Sunday with you two and a half months ago we read the Transfiguration. Who remembers this story? Peter up the mountain with Jesus, trying to micromanage the situation. Trying to hold on to that perfect moment.

And for me, that's Peter to a T. Peter seems to always be trying to take the road behind him. LORD, let's stay here. LORD, don't go on to Jerusalem. LORD, don't wash my feet, let me wash yours because that's the way we've always done things. LORD, I'll follow you anywhere, as long as you are going back to that perfect transfiguration. Peter never seems to want to take the road before him. Peter always wants to take the road back.

Spiritual Refugees

They want to take the road back. There are more refugees in the world now than in anytime in history. Some of the most powerful stories I've heard are of Palestinian refugees. The ones who still hold the keys to the homes from which they were evicted in 1968. Who pass their keys on to their children. Who knows? Maybe the tide of justice is turning. Maybe they'll yet go back to their homes of 1968.

But they won't be going back to 1968. That is, if people are refugees of a place, then there is always hope. But if people are refugees of a particular time, there is no return. Spiritual refugees, as poet Christian Wiman calls such people, do not get to go back. Because even God isn't in the business of turning back time.

If that were the case, where would you like to go? The 1950's? The 1970's? I've been told that the difference between Republicans and Democrats is just that they long to go back to different decades. But

maybe you just long for a certain moment. For that one Christmas when your beloved was still healthy. Or to that time when your child discovered something wonderful. Whenever it was that everything was coming together.

For me, that was August of 2001. By September, it was all falling apart. “Here – now – along these letters, against the wall of my very heart.” And so to the detriment of moving ahead, I just longed to go back. Maybe you know that feeling, so you also don’t judge Peter too harshly. Because in his longing to go back, he longs for Jesus. After all, Peter is the one who keeps jumping out of the boat to get to him. Peter is the one who rushes into the tomb.

I wonder. I wonder what Peter is thinking when he is alone with Tabbitah’s body. I wonder if as Peter says, “Tabbitha, get up” he remembers how Jesus said, “Peter, lie down. Peter, lay it down. Peter, stop trying to take the road back. It’s time to go forward.” As Jesus says on the beach in the Gospel of John, “When you were young, you went wherever you wanted. But when you are older, they will fasten a belt around your waist, and take you where you do not want to go.”

These words for Peter also are words for the institutional church. I think we would just as soon return to its past. We miss the time when there were more of us. We miss the people who used to be here, and we may think, on some level, that longing to return to our past is the best way to honor them. But it’s not.

We can honor them by inheriting their mission: To spread the Gospel in the way that is most relevant and significant to our present place and time. To grow in our faith and teach it to others, that we may make the world more just and compassionate –like the commonwealth of God.

That’s not to say that the people in our past didn’t get it. If we who here now can see more clearly the path ahead, it is only because we are standing on the shoulders of those come before us. If we are ready now to step into the future, it is only because saints have prepared us for it.

A faith that doesn’t stay dead

Saints that we know/ those in stories, like Saint Tabbita. Because Tabitha who mastered giving away everything – from garments to her very breath – teaches Peter – and in turn, us – that life is not simply about hanging on, or going back. Life is about taking the road before us – even if it means facing the death of our past, or the people we love. And that we *can* do all of that with hope, if we have hope in Jesus Christ.

It takes Peter a while to get it, but there’s a hint of revelation. Peter leaves Tabitha and goes to stay with a tanner. However subtly and slowly he goes, even Peter learns to take the road...

That’s what it means to practice resurrection. It means to lay down all of our hopes, all of our longing for what used to be, knowing that Christ will raise them up. Resurrection is stepping out of our past, knowing that God holds all things –so we can travel light on the path before us. Resurrection is having faith that in Christ, through Christ, and with Christ we can step into the future of new life that God has promised.