

## FOLLOWING JESUS: TOWARDS RESURRECTION I Peter 1:3-9

Kelly Boyte Brill  
Avon Lake UCC  
29 August 2021

The Christian life is captured in the story of Jesus' last week on earth. During Holy Week, Jesus experiences betrayal, disappointment, loneliness, physical suffering and death. But the story ends with an empty tomb. The story ends with **sunrise**, and Easter Sunday morning, and with the lives of Jesus' followers changed for good. Holy Week ends with **resurrection, new life**, the **triumph of love** over hatred.

The miracle doesn't begin with Easter, though. The miracle begins with the incarnation: the story of God choosing to enter this world as a human being. Because of the incarnation, we know that we are never alone. We too will experience betrayal, disappointment, loneliness, physical suffering and death - but not alone. The God who walked this earth in the person of Jesus is our companion, accompanying us. The incarnation and the resurrection are the twin pillars of our faith; we are people who celebrate the birth of Jesus because of the Easter story; we are people who celebrate Christmas because of who that baby grew up to be, and what his story now means to us. We celebrate **Easter** because it isn't just his story; it's our story, too. We are Easter people. In the book of Romans, Paul writes, "If we were united together in a death like his, we will also be united together in a resurrection like his."

We are Easter people. But it's hard to remember that, isn't it?

Over the past week, I had some experiences that felt more like Good Friday than Easter.

At a lovely wedding reception last weekend, Doug and I ran into some old friends, people we hadn't seen in a couple of years. I know their three children, so I asked about them and found out where they're living, what they're doing. The conversation continued with the husband saying, "You know, we might move out of state when we retire...especially if we have grandchildren." The wife looked at him, then looked at me and said, "I'm not sure any of our children will have children because...well, you know, because of the way the world is..." and her voice just sort of trailed off. She said it as calmly and casually as if we were talking about what we were having for dinner, and the moment passed. But her comment has haunted me all week. We are living in a time when people matter-of-factly admit that they might not have grandchildren because the state of the world is too frightening. That felt like Good Friday to me.

A few days later a parishioner emailed me and asked if I had time to talk with her. She said she'd watched my sermon online last week; in fact, she watched it twice. My comments about the parable of the Good Samaritan hit home for her. When I said that there seems to be an increase in meanness right now, she related. She told me about a feud in her family. It has to do with vaccinations and social media. Harsh words have been spoken, feelings are hurt, relationships are frayed to the point of breaking. We talked on the phone and I could hear the pain in her voice.

Another member, who has a leadership role in the community where he lives, texted and shared with me an email he received from a fellow citizen. The email began with logic and reason but the longer it went, the more emotional it became, and it ended with threats and accusations.

I was a part of these Good Friday conversations this week. Yet we are not Good Friday people. We are Easter people.

In the midst of the news, in the midst of the horrible news coming from Afghanistan, the devastation in Haiti and Tennessee, trouble in so many other places and lives, we are Easter people.

The charismatic pastor and professor Tony Campolo once preached a sermon called, "It's Friday, but Sunday's coming." He acknowledged that we are Easter people who live in a Good Friday world. We do not deny the reality of the problems we see around us, yet we know there is another perspective, a **resurrection** perspective.

Today is the last week in this four-week sermon series, "Following Jesus." The culmination of our journey with Jesus is our participation in the miracle of the resurrection. The promise is that we, too, will live in hope. We, too, will experience new life. We, too, will come to believe that nothing is stronger than love. That **love will prevail** over hatred and evil and even death itself. We preach this message on Easter, of course, but if we are Easter people, we will remember the resurrection more than once a year.

This is Jan Richardson. She is a minister, artist, writer, retreat leader. In 2013, after she and her husband had been married just three years, he went to the doctor because he felt like something wasn't quite right with his throat. His throat looked fine to the doctor but a scan found a brain aneurysm. Almost immediately he was booked for a risky surgery. He suffered a stroke in the operating room and died 2 1/2 weeks later. Jan Richardson has spent the last 8 years of her life in public grief. As she has tried to process her own loss, she has looked for ways to help others - through art,

retreats and several books. Here's one way she describes her grief and her persistent hope: "In the midst of my grief, what I know is that hope, inexplicably, has not left me. My hope is stubborn. Hope lives in me like a **muscle** that keeps reaching and stretching, or a lung that keeps working even when I do not will it, persisting in the constant intake and release of breath on which my life depends." Hope is stubborn.

Jan Richardson does **not** believe that everything happens for a reason. Rather, she chooses to look at the painful parts of her life story and see in them signs of God's presence. Her Good Friday experience does not define her life. In her grief journey, she has found both hope and meaning. Her pain isn't gone, she is still grieving, but she is an Easter person.

We can learn to be Easter people, even in these difficult times, by looking at the lives of those who have survived far worse. Several survivors of the concentration camps went on to write about how they kept hope alive. I'll mention three today. Viktor Frankl sat down to write a book just months after his liberation from a camp in Germany. He wanted to remember everything he'd learned in that place of such suffering. He noticed the differences in the way people reacted, including this: "The prisoners who lost faith in their future lost their spiritual hold; they almost immediately began declining. But those who maintained a sense of purpose - even if that purpose was so small as giving a bite of bread to another person or trying to cheer up their bunkmate - those people who had a **WHY** could endure almost anything."

Edith Eger believes her sense of internal hope helped keep her alive while at Auschwitz. She actually had more trouble with her attitude when she was trying to build

a new life afterwards. She had to learn to forgive everyone involved before she truly experienced freedom.

And Elie Wiesel, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, once was asked by a journalist: “Despite your disappointment and pessimism, do you remain hopeful? Do you still have faith in God as the ultimate redeemer?” He answered this way: “I would be within my rights to give up faith in God, and I could invoke six million reasons to justify such a decision, but I am incapable of straying from the path charted by my forefathers...We **must** wager on the future. We must **not** give in to cynicism. Hope is our gift to each other. So, my wounded faith endures.”

In this time and place, in a world of war and terrorism, a virus named COVID and other viruses with names like meanness and prejudice, in a world of climate change and so much despair, we are called to be Easter People. We don't find our way towards the resurrection by sticking our heads in the sand or putting on rose-colored glasses. No, we look at the problems of this world with clear eyes and **yet we proclaim**, “This is not all there is. We believe in a God who has shown us that love is stronger than hatred and evil and even death itself. It's Friday, but we know about Sunday.”

As I was writing this sermon, I began receiving emails inquiring about how our church is going to respond to Afghan refugees who might be resettling in Ohio. We are actively connected to several organizations involved in this effort, especially the organization, Global Cleveland. Watch our emails and announcements for ways you can help. We know that doing something for others - being involved in positive work that makes a difference for good - is one of the most effective ways to feel hopeful. One of our members is on a pro bono legal team assisting in immigration matters; I can

connect you to her if any other attorneys in the church want to be a part of that effort. We will be sharing other specifics when we have them.

A few years ago, I preached a sermon about Father Greg Boyle, the founder of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, which is the largest program in the world for gang intervention, rehab and re-entry. He has been working with former gang members for more than 33 years. With a tremendous gift for empathy, and also a no-nonsense approach, he sees each young person who walks through his doors as a person with a story, usually a painful story of trauma. He says, "These kids don't need information as much as they need healing." He knows they join gangs because they're running away from difficult situations at home. The language of the gangs is the language of a lethal absence of hope. His job is to teach them a different language. He wants them to feel valued, to feel held. Listen to his words: "These young people come to us barricaded behind a wall of shame and disgrace and we've discovered at Homeboy the only thing that can scale that wall is tenderness, which is love that becomes concrete and real and visual and tactile." Love that is stronger than gang violence. **Resurrection love.**

There has been a lot of heaviness in this sermon. I want to leave you with a concrete piece of resurrection hope. In June of this year, Homebody Industries received a gift of \$20 million from philanthropists Mackenzie Scott and Dan Jewett. In receiving the gift, Father Greg Boyle thanked those who support their work. He said, "Together, we will stand with those on the margins until the margins are erased."

He knows about Good Friday; he's officiated at hundreds of funerals for boys and girls he'd come to love. But he is an Easter person. And so are we. And so are we.

Let us pray.

Holy God of all times and all places, revive our spirits today so that we can live in this world as Easter people, standing with those on the margins, making a difference for good, keeping hope alive. In the name of the resurrected Christ. Amen.