

April 30, 2017
Third Sunday of Easter

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“The Long Journey”

Kevin J. Lowry



*“Take courage friends. The way is often hard, the path is never clear, and the stakes are very high.
Take courage. For deep down, there is another truth: you are not alone.”*

~ Reverend Wayne B. Arnason

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Psalm 46

- ¹*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*
- ²*Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;*
- ³*though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble
with its tumult. Selah*
- ⁴*There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy
habitation of the Most High.*
- ⁵*God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help
it when the morning dawns.*
- ⁶*The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice,
the earth melts.*
- ⁷*The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah*
- ⁸*Come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations he has
brought on the earth.*
- ⁹*He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow,
and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.*
- ¹⁰*“Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.”*
- ¹¹*The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah*

Philippians 3:9–14

The justice I possess is that which comes through faith in Christ. It has its origins in God and is biased on faith. All I wanted is to know Christ, and the power of the Resurrection, and how to share in Christ’s sufferings by being formed into the pattern of Jesus’ death – perhaps even arrive at the resurrection from the dead.

It is not that I have reached it yet, or have already finished my course; but I am running the race in order to grab hold of the prize if possible, since Christ Jesus has grabbed hold of me. Sisters and brothers, I don’t think of myself as having reached the finish line. I give no thought to what lies behind, but I push on to what is ahead. My entire attention is on the finish line as I run towards the prize – The High calling of God in Christ Jesus.

“The Long Journey”
Psalm 46; Philippians 3:9–14

Researcher and storyteller, Brene Brown says...

“When we deny our stories, they define us. When we own our stories, we get to write a brave new ending.”¹

Brown believes that writing a brave new ending in our personal and communal lives means that we have to have the hard conversations about our pasts, whether it is hurt feelings in our families that have stockpiled hurt, rage, resentment, and isolation, or finding a way to own our collective stories around racism and white supremacy in this country. Brene Brown believes that owning our stories is standing in our truth. It’s transformative in our individual lives AND it’s also critical in our community lives.

Do you think that when the disciples, dropped everything to follow Jesus that they, knew how their story would change and how they would be transformed by the journey they were setting out on, only to be up ended by the death and resurrection of Jesus. God chose to use men and women with differing backgrounds, education, and social standing to create a movement that would radically transform the hearts, and minds, and souls for over 2000 years.

What I appreciate most about the apostles is their absolutely ordinary humanity. Each one of them, flawed, comes to follow Jesus, with their full and authentic selves, bringing with them their own story, their fears, anxiety, doubts, and hope for a new world. Throughout the story of Jesus we witness them, on their faith journey, having to wrestle with some of the very same things that we encounter along ours.

Paul is no different, and if you are not familiar with Paul’s life before his conversion, he does some pretty awful things to those Jews who are now following the way and teachings of Jesus. In the passage before the one we heard, Paul is having a pretty honest reflection of things in which he is ashamed of, as well as those ways in which he has experienced the privilege given to him because of his wealth, social location, and religious and cultural identity. In this letter to the Philippians he does not shy away from confessing the sins of his past, stating that he persecuted the church to which he now belongs; but he also

¹ Brene Brown. “Brene Brown Blog” Our Own History: Change the Story, June 18, 2015.
<http://brenebrown.com/2015/06/18/own-our-history-change-the-story/>

unhesitatingly lists those things from his past in which he recognizes he can justifiably claim pride. Through this reflection, Paul owns his past, the good and the bad in the attempt to write a new story, a resurrection story by living faithfully in Christ.

By confronting his past he recognizes that things which he valued in the past, which gave him status, are no longer important to him. He leaves the past behind to follow a new road map; the way that Jesus has laid out through his ministry; a radical transformation of our hearts, a deep passion for social justice, a commitment to humbly serve each other and to love our neighbor – and our enemies – as ourselves. This is the brave new ending that Paul is writing; this is the race that he is running.

A few days ago, my Facebook memory was a picture of my family from four years ago when my wife Alex, completed her first 5K which was color run. Now if you have not been to a color run, it is a spectacular event. There is a designated race course that all the runners follow and along the way race volunteers hurl hand full of powdered dye at you, so by the end of the race course you are covered in a kaleidoscope of colors. For my wife the color run was a transformative experience. Alex, who had never ran before, decided she was going to run a 5K. In preparation for race day, she decided to follow a Couch to 5K program. The Couch to 5K program is not only to build your capacity and endurance to run, it allows you to shift your mind, to fully transform for the task ahead. On race day what was important to her was not winning the race or having a personal best time, what was important was running the race. For her the act of being engaged, from start to finish, was the most transformative part of the journey, the transformation that she had undergone was part of the brave new story that she was writing.

Paul uses the analogy of a race to describe his faith journey, and how that journey he has turned his mind towards being in right-relationship with God. He is setting aside the old ways, his old beliefs, his old privileges in order to serve the living God. It is living into the faithfulness of Christ. It is the trust in the living God that enables Paul to view his life differently, to mentally prepare for the transformative journey that in which he is in the midst. Jesus calls each of us into a total transformation, to love God with all our hearts, all our minds and all our souls. In a modern world full of noise, this means that we have to claim a heightened sense of self and discover who we are as a people in who

Christ dwells. It is our trust in the living God that sustains us through the hard difficult journeys that we find ourselves on in our lives.

In my four years in college there were five ways that college changed me, Cody Johnson, a student at Stephen F. Austin University, reflects on ways he was changed during his college journey. I learned that no one will be there to hold your hand while they solve your problems; That you are not defined by who you once were; That you actually have to plan things out. That the way we come to terms with challenges makes us better people, and that we grow from everything the world throws at us—good and bad; I found a sense of discovery, I discovered what I was passionate about, what made me happy and what made my life complete. I had to come to terms with challenges

He goes on to say that the main thing he relied on was his faith, “I would pray and wait. Sooner or later, my prayer would be answered, and others, well I’m still waiting, still praying. I also thought everything out, questioned myself when I had to and went with the flow when I couldn’t. College changes you, if forces you to grow.²

Paul’s faith journey leads him into faithful service as he proclaims the Good News to the Gentiles across the roman world. Along this journey Paul comes to understand is that the resurrection is the catalyst for rebirth and transformation, as he witnessed in himself. The resurrection happens along the journey. When the women found the tomb, it was empty, the resurrection had already begun before they got there.

In her poetic reflection Jan Richardson reflects on this transformative moment, that no-one witnessed but has transformed the world for generations...

“While it was still dark.
While it was still night.
While she could not see.
While she thought death held sway.
While she grieved.
While she wept.”³
While it was still dark, resurrection began.

² Cody Johnson. “The Odyssey Online” Growing In College: Five Ways College Changes People. June 8, 2015. <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/@codyjohnson>

³ Jan Richardson “Painted Prayer Book Blog” Easter: While it was Still Dark, April 15, 2017. <http://paintedprayerbook.com/>

When Paul encounters Jesus on the road to Damascus, the transformation in Paul's life had already begun. In the middle of the journey, the resurrection shakes it up, redefines the image and challenges us to live differently, to live as God has planned.

The resurrection is like a Kaleidoscope. When you peer into a Kaleidoscope, you see something beautiful. But after you shake it up, destroying what is there, and hold it up to the light again, you will see something familiar, yet new and different, that is transformed and yet still beautiful. Following, God is much the same as the kaleidoscope, God's way, shakes us up, but being open to the resurrection will reveal something new and beautiful, but only if we take the time to hold it up to the light and look inside."

Being open to the resurrection means being open to the journey. It means looking forward, not back; listening, not stopping up our ears; tasting before we swallow; smelling the flowers, not passing them by; feeling deeply rather than numbing ourselves with the daily routine. The resurrection is an entirely new roadmap for our interactions between person and person and people and God. Being open to the resurrection means owning our past – the good, bad and the ugly parts – and being courageous enough to write a brave new story that leads us forward.

Each of us are on a journey, For some you are growing through your time in college; for others you may be wrestling with the complexities of our political atmosphere; issues around race and confronting white supremacy in our culture; for others you may be looking back and remembering when "it" (what ever that may be) was great. As Christ followers, just like the apostles we have to own our stories, our fear, our anxiety and doubt as we faithfully serve one another and God. As people of the resurrection, we are to be engaged in the journey and courageous enough to disrupt our own lives and courageously right our own stories as the people of God.

Amen.