

I'm Still Here

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Luke 24:1-12, Acts 10:34-43, Philippians 3:10-11

I awoke today, as you did, to the news of more violence. This time directed toward churches and people in Sri Lanka. News of nearly 200 killed and 500 injured in multiple bombings.

At this news, I remembered Good Friday.

On Good Friday, we had tried our best . . . knowingly and unknowingly to rid the world of God.

We looked in the face of God and spit. We hung his body on a tree, the most cursed way we could find to kill him. We laid him in a tomb, thinking we'd be in control and go on with life as we wish.

But on the third day . . . while it was still dark, Mary went to the tomb and found the stone had been rolled away.

Jesus has slipped through our grasp and he is risen!

The Apostle Paul said, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead." Philippians 3:10-11

Two or three months ago now, I was given a book by my colleague, Pastor Juana Jordan from First UMC in St Augustine. Juana is the first African American woman appointed to an all-white church here in St Augustine. Have you met Juana? She pulled this book out of her bag and handed it to me. The title of the book is "I'm Still Here."

"I'm Still Here" is the story of a black woman named Austin Channing Brown who writes:

"My story is about surviving in a world not made for me – where my parents tried to arm me with the cultural cash of a white, male name."

It occurred to me this week that Austin Channing Brown's book is a **resurrection story**.

Austin's reality is that she lives in a world that was not made for her. "We live in a world made for whiteness," she writes – a world made to use black bodies when it is convenient for sports entertainment, landscaping, domestic-help, support-staff or as a token friend just to prove "I'm not racist . . ."

In the face of this world, Austin Channing Brown says, "**I'm still here!**"

I'm still living! I'm still showing up. I'm still using my voice. I still love the world that wants to pin me down, box me up, take me out when it's convenient and use me to prop up its own agenda.

I still love this world – so I'm still here . . .

AND I'm not here to be controlled anymore. I'm here with the dignity of a voice that will speak up and speak out. I'm here to turn the world upside down (that's what resurrection means by the way) – to turn the world upside down, to disrupt the way things are.

This may sound unkind. It may feel scary and threatening, especially if you think everything is fine the way it is.

But let me assure you of this – just because you have gotten *used* to the chains in this culture – this mono-culture – it doesn't make them good.

The process of becoming free – the process of dying and rising from the dead – the process of losing your chains is scary, it feels unkind, it is threatening . . .

AND there is no more loving, no more compassionate, no better news that you could know.

Maybe you are used to thinking of **Easter** as something that happened 2,000 years ago – a memory of Jesus' death and resurrection. OR maybe it's simply a way to enjoy some good music, pretty flowers, dye some eggs or wear new clothes.

I want to suggest another option for thinking of Easter. . .

Easter is a current reality that is making this world new . . . making this church new . . . making our city new . . . making our relationships new . . . making you new.

*Like Apostle Paul discovered . . . [remember Paul was someone who was bombing the church in the first century. He was a persecutor of the Church]. Paul discovered that Easter was a current reality where he would **share in Jesus' sufferings by becoming like him in his death**, [we cannot skip over this part. Easter is a current reality where we share in Jesus' sufferings by becoming like him in his death] so that we may somehow attain the resurrection from the dead.*

It occurred to me this week that **Jesus has a lot in common with Austin Channing Brown**. Jesus was born into a world that wanted him dead. At best it wanted him to stay in his place as a marginalized, tax-paying, Palestinian Jew . . . alternatively . . . it wanted to use him for its own violent agenda to overthrow the Roman oppressors.

Jesus could either live in this world as it is or he could die. That was the world's message to Jesus. That has been the world's message to black women like Austin Channing Brown. Live in this world as it is or die. . . . [seems like this is the message for anyone who wants to follow the way of Jesus. Live in this world as it is or die.]

But Jesus has a different message for the world, for the church, for our city, for our relationships and for you.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. I have come to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and let the oppressed go free." Luke 4:18

During Jesus' life and ministry he said and did **many beautiful and kind things**.

He healed the sick,
Fed the hungry,
Calmed the storms and even raised the dead.

These things drew large crowds.

In addition to that, Jesus said and did **many beautiful things that were so disturbing** to people that they wanted him dead.

- He ate with sinners (the wrong kind of people).
- He broke the Bible laws about Sabbath that kept the church boxed away from the suffering of the world, and he broke the Bible laws about excluding and murdering prostitutes.
- He said he was God and King. (He did things only God was supposed to do, like forgive sin).
- And maybe worst of all, he started insinuating that God's favor rested upon people who weren't Jewish – that God would include Gentiles in the covenant of promise.

Jesus wasn't killed for being nice. Jesus was pinned down, mocked, beat, spit-on, thorn-crowned and nailed alive to a cross until he died because **he was a threat to the way this world is.**

We don't want a God who will not do our violent bidding.

We don't want a God who refuses to hate who we hate and fear who we fear.

We don't want a God who refuses to act quickly on our behalf.

We don't want a God who is always ruining our comfortable set-up by constantly asking us to follow him places where we have no control.

So we killed Jesus to silence him, and so we could continue to live our lives the way we want to live them.

But there's Easter . . .

EASTER is the disturbingly good news that our love for oppression has not worked out as we hoped. EASTER is the disturbingly good news that our love for living the way we want to live has not worked out like we hoped.

Jesus rises from the dead and proclaims . . . "I'm still here!" [You aren't getting rid of me!]

Jesus is still living in the midst of our world, our church, our city, our relationships and he wants to live in you.

Jesus is still here close enough to be embraced and break bread with us who murdered him . . .

AND he lives never to be a captive or a possession of ours.

[We cannot succeed in making Jesus into whatever we want him to be for us, as if he were some kind of idol. He is not a captive or possession of ours.]

Jesus is still here and keeps moving toward the New Creation that is God's reality on this earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus is still here moving toward this New Creation – always with an open invitation for people to join him when they are ready.

[Are you ready to join him? Have you heard his call to you?]

Peter, the Jewish disciples of Jesus who disowned him three times, probably had a moment after the crucifixion when he said to himself, "What have I done?!?!"

"I didn't have the hammer in my hand, but I had it in my heart. I've crucified the Lord of life – who can save me now?!?!"

Perhaps you've had moments when you also say those words as you are convicted in your heart?

What have I done?!?! I have made such a mess of things.
I meant well . . . but I still have rejected the way of Jesus.
I may not have had the hammer in my hand, but I've had it in my heart.

Again, **the disturbingly good news of Easter is that your failures haven't sealed your fate.**

[Say that with me: "My failures are not my fate!"]

Jesus is risen! He stands before you today saying, "I'm Still Here."

Jesus is still here saying, "You are forgiven. You are free. Come, follow me."

Do you hear him now?

He is still here!