

Authentication

From the series: The Human Face of God

Text: Luke 24:5; Philippians 2:11

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
Easter, April 12, 1998

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Well, we made it once again; we have paid our dues, walked through the darkness, remembered the passion and pain of Jesus, lingered at least briefly at the cross and now, thank God, we've emerged on the other side. A new world dawns this Easter morn. The alleluias return, the thrill of triumph, unalloyed joy permeates our being, all is well, life is good. Spring is here.

Thank God it's over - Lent, that is, the minor-keyed music, the extinguishing of light, the disconcerting "My God, my God, why ..."

Were I a decent pastor, I would let you off the hook, let you cut loose, ring bells, shout Alleluias, let you have at least this day for total triumph, celebration, and release.

But, for a few moments, let me ask you to reflect on the meaning of the stark contrast between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

There were only a handful of you here Friday noon, so let me picture it for you. In fact, let me begin with Thursday evening. The meal shared, the altar stripped, the sanctuary darkened, the choir lined the brick walls with tiny, illuminated crosses: I then took the Paschal Candle, walked it out, snuffed it out, using the words with which John tells the story as Judas was dismissed from the Last Supper, "It was night."

Friday, the altar stripped, the old wooden cross leaned against the table draped in black by Cathy Weideman who waited at the cross as a few pilgrims straggled in. Then as Greg Martin sang, "Were You There?" she danced in vivid portrayal of the nailing to the tree, the laying in the tomb. In a darkened sanctuary, the Seven Words from the cross were read, prayers following, concluding with the somber tolling of the bell.

That's all - we heard the words again, "My God, why." "It is finished." "Into thy hands ..."

And now, look at us - White replacing black, flowers in resplendent beauty, joyful anthems, hymns resonate with joy.

You know this; it's all familiar. Some of you have actually experienced it again right here in these past days. Most of you have had at least some exposure to it through the worship of the season of Lent. But, I want you to think about it for a moment.

Darkness to Light

Despair to Hope

Death to Life.

That is the central paradigm of the Christian faith, is it not? In the appointments of the sanctuary, the mood of the music, the tone of the liturgy, the stark contrast is brought to expression.

Now, here is a question for you: What is the relationship of Lent to Easter, of the darkness to the light, of Good Friday to Easter Sunday?

For most of my life and ministry, this is how I would have answered the question: The human family, alienated from God through disobedience, was lost in darkness, destined to eternal death. God sent Jesus to live among us, to do what we failed to do.

As Paul in Phil. 2 writes,

Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited ...

That was Adam's problem, who stands for us all - created in the image of God, he asserted himself rather than humble himself as befits the creature before the Creation.

Jesus perfectly obeyed, took upon himself the sins of the world, endured God's just judgment on the cross, and was raised by God as a sign that the penalty for human guilt was paid in full; therefore, once destined for death, now by faith in Jesus Christ we are destined for life.

It happened once for all, back there - The darkness was engaged, defeated. This is now an Easter world. Therefore, the bare altar and darkened sanctuary, sign of the judgment of God borne by Jesus, become the brightness of Easter morning with new Easter fire. To say it in other words - Jesus' death was about atoning for human sin, absorbing human punishment, effecting salvation, life now and forever.

That is the classic salvation myth we have inherited from the Christian tradition.

A new age dawned.

A new world was born.

Death is overcome; heaven is won.

Therefore, we remember the darkness of his abandonment on Good Friday, hardly able to wait to get beyond it to the celebration of this happy morning.

But, something doesn't seem to fit with the manner in which we have observed Lent. The focus has been The Human Face of God. We have followed the life of Jesus from his baptism, his call and claim, his identity as the Suffering Servant, the clarity of his vision to portray an alternative world - a world marked by grace, including all and excluding none, a world marked by compassion, justice and non-violence. In a word, Jesus was about the mending of creation, the shaping of a different kind of society, about the transformation of this world, this good earth, this present concrete human experience.

If that focus is true to the real Jesus, then one might wonder what all the shouting is about *because it doesn't seem that much has changed in 2000 years.* In the course of the Lenten messages, I have had occasion to point out the parallel between Jesus weeping over Jerusalem and contemporary voices weeping over Jerusalem as Israel prepares to celebrate 50 years of statehood. I have pointed to figures within our own historical experience who, following the way of Jesus, have suffered the same fate - Gandhi, Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, to mention only three.

Let me suggest that we have declared victory too soon. We have grasped eagerly on the resurrection of Jesus as a victory that is ours to celebrate, as though the battle's o'er, the victory won, when, in reality, the battle is not over and the victory has not been won.

Sorry to ruin your Easter, but if I would be a faithful servant of the Word of God and honest with the human condition, I must tell you the old world has not changed.

This is not an Easter world; it is rather very much still a Good Friday world. To deny that is to live in denial. The only way to avoid that conclusion is to stick with the old evangelical explanation that Jesus was about securing personal forgiveness and promises of heaven through his death and resurrection. But, I don't know how one can fail to recognize that Jesus was about something much larger, about the transformation of the world, no less.

So, what, then - is there nothing to celebrate? Is there no reason for singing an Easter song? Is there really no Good News?

There is good news. It is really good news, given an honest appraisal of the world as a continuing Good Friday world.

The Good News is that our history marked by Good Friday is not the whole story; it is part of something larger, the dimensions of which we cannot conceive and from beyond history, beyond the limits of our Good Friday world, the way of Jesus was confirmed as authentic, reflecting the way through one in the big picture.

I came across a tribute to a biblical theologian who died December 30 of last year. John Howard Yoder was a Mennonite, people whose roots lie in the Netherlands in the first part of the 16th century. They were part of the radical Reformation; that is, they went further in their reforms than Luther and Calvin. A distinguishing mark is non-violence. They are pacifist, living in simplicity, similar to the Amish.

In Sarasota, Florida, in February, we walked out on the beach in bright sunshine with a great variety of human flesh exposed to the sun's rays. There sat a half dozen or so folk, full-clad, all in black, on lawn chairs, on the beach. They were Mennonites, appearing so out of place.

John Howard Yoder was an excellent scholar. He served for a time at Notre Dame. His most popular work was entitled *The Politics of Jesus* - a politics very much as we have observed in our Lenten focus. In the piece, in memory of John Howard Yoder, was this paragraph appearing near the end of that work:

The key to the obedience of God's people is not their effectiveness but their patience. The triumph of the right is assured not by the might that comes to the aid of the right, which is of course the justification of the use of violence and the other kinds of power in every human conflict; the triumph of the right, although it is assured, is sure because of the power of the resurrection and not because of any calculation of causes and effects, nor because of the inherently greater strength of the good guys. The relationship between the obedience of God's people and the triumph of God's cause is not a relationship of cause and effect but one of cross and resurrection.

Let me see if I can express Yoder's point and thus express what I am claiming is the really good news of Easter. Yoder is saying that the triumph of right is assured. But that triumph will not be the result of the obedience of God's people as cause and effect.

The key to obedience is not effectiveness, it is patience, or persistence - the willingness of following a way that never has and never will win the world. It is a patient persistence in the embodying of the life of the Kingdom of God in the midst of this world, which always manages to crucify such embodiment. The end

of obedience is the cross. Resurrection is God's action beyond the cross, beyond history.

But the victory is assured. How can I believe that? Because - a quote from Yoder,

"The people who bear the crosses are working with the grain of the universe."

I find that a fascinating statement. I have always claimed that the way of Jesus cut against the grain of our natural inclination. And it does. The call of the way of Jesus brings us into conflict with the way of the world, with the way of our natural inclination. But, here's the point:

The way of Jesus goes *with* the grain of the universe. From beyond history comes the power of resurrection. Authentication is God's act after the Good Friday world has worked its worst. We want to pull Easter into history. We want victory now. We want to win now. But, we won't to the extent we follow the way of Jesus. It is not ours to win; it is ours patiently to live out the way of Jesus.

That will mean going against the grain of every natural drive and compulsion, but it will be going with the grain of the universe - and it will count; it will count with God. And the end will be transformation. To the extent that we would do that seriously, we would stick out as sharply as Mennonites on lawn chairs, completely covered in black, sunning ourselves amidst the company of nearly nude sun worshipers.

Let me put this question to you: If Jesus' death and resurrection were not the effecting of your personal salvation as has been so commonly claimed in the church, would you still follow Jesus?

What if we simply bracket the question of our personal forgiveness and assurance of salvation - not denying that, but simply putting that to one side for a moment, would you still follow Jesus because you really believed his way is the only way the creation can be mended and the world transformed?

Again - apart from questions of salvation, heaven when you die, etc., apart from that - do you believe Jesus' way of being and doing is God's way? If it got you a noose, a bullet and surely a cross, are you so gripped by Jesus that you would follow his way?

I could on this day simply let all the stops be pulled out, simply cut loose, claim the victory. I suspect there is even some place for that. But, is that really honest? Does that really prepare you to go back into a Good Friday world? Is it not more honest for me to tell you that following Jesus's way will meet the same opposition today and have the same consequences today as then?

So then, if you are really inwardly compelled to walk that way in fear and trembling, partially, falteringly, you will not be disappointed by lack of success or startled by opposition.

Why would one do it? Why did Jesus? or Bonhoeffer?

Because it is right, it is true - and to obey what one is convinced is right and true is to be free, is to live, is to experience resurrection now, and the eternal brightness of God finally. It is to be working with the grain of the universe.

Resurrection is a present freedom of spirit and hope for the dawning of Light Eternal. It is living from inside out, true to one's vision, finding hope in the resurrection of Jesus as sign from God of ultimate authentication. When one reaches that state of integrity of vision and life, one has moved beyond the possibility of disappointment or defeat. That is life eternal.

Jesus is Lord to the glory of God.

That was, they say, the earliest Christian creed. Jesus is Lord. That was the confession that flowed out of Good Friday darkness and the dawning consciousness of Easter light.

Jesus is Lord! *Kurios* Jesus!
The whole world shouted back,
No way!
Caesar is Lord! *Kurios* Caesar!
Jesus is dead!
But, a few followers knew better -
"The Lord is risen!," they cried. Jesus is Lord!

Jesus' way authenticated in a Good Friday world by those whose lives reflect that way, living with the grain of the universe, trusting God that history's final darkness is not final; that the darkness will not forever suppress the light, but finally yield to the brightness of Light Eternal.

The Lord is risen.
Jesus is Lord!
That is the good news in a Good Friday world.

History reels on its violent, drunken drive for power and glory toward death. But, history is not the last word. The crucified lives. Jesus is Lord. Therefore, in this Good Friday world strewn with crosses of the gentle ones, there is reason to hope and to keep on loving, gracing, caring - forgiving, for from beyond history's limits dawns the Easter world.