

A Shift in Perception

From the series: Resurrection

Acts 7:54-8:1; I Corinthians 13:1-8; John 20:19-23

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

It is a marvelous way to celebrate Eastertide with a Dance of Creation. It was a goddess of fertility named Oster who gave us the name Easter and the ancient people prior to the Axial Period, 800 to 600 B.C.E., celebrated their religious observances according to the rhythms of nature, the cycles of the year. And so, what a beautiful way for us to celebrate the coming alive of the earth on a beautiful day like this with the flowers budding and the buds bursting, to celebrate the goodness of God in the wonders of creation.

Resurrection, as an experience of life after death, was really a conception that came to the fore shortly before the birth of Christ. There isn't much in the Hebrew Scriptures about any life after death. They don't even worry about it. The goodness of God in the land of the living was the blessing of God for the people of Israel. But, in those couple of centuries before the birth of Christ, there was increasing persecution, and in the books we call the Apocryphal books, that were filled with apocalyptic expectations, the intervention of God at the end of history, we find resurrection as an idea coming to the fore, and the reason that resurrection came into the consciousness of people was the fact that there were righteous, God-fearing people who were witnessing to their faith in God who were being killed. They were called the righteous martyrs. As the community considered the fact that these people were being killed for their refusal to deny their faith in God, they looked at one another and said, "Must not God in justice vindicate these righteous ones who have died for their faith and their honor of God?" And so, resurrection came to be an idea, a hope, an expectation that somehow or another, in the end, those who had died for their faith would be vindicated by resurrection, by God.

When the community of Jesus' followers, following his crucifixion, experienced him as with them still, when they experienced still after his crucifixion the grace that he conveyed, the love that he embodied, the freedom that he offered, they said, "He is not dead, he's living." And from their depression and their fears and their crushed hopes, they had a shift in perception and resurrection is what they called it. Resurrection is a shift in perception. It is a miracle; it is a miracle of

love. It is an experience of an insight, the gaining of an understanding that is life-changing, that is life-transforming. Resurrection is a shift in perception.

Now, of course, we say today perception is everything and there is something to that, but that's not what I mean. What that means is that the empirical reality out there isn't the issue, it is our perception of that empirical reality. I do know the physicists among us would tell us that the observer affects the observed and I'm not going to get into all that philosophical stuff. This is just simply a straightforward claim this morning that a shift in perception, a change in understanding is resurrection, and it is life-changing. It is wonderful.

The prison of our tombs, the stones are rolled away, the shackles fall off, the scales fall from our eyes and suddenly we get it, we see it. I think that's what happened in the experience of those followers of Jesus in the wake of the crucifixion. Although in Luke and in John there certainly are resurrection stories that seem to intentionally want to emphasize a physical, bodily presence, that is not the majority of the resurrection accounts at all. The stories vary widely in the New Testament, as you might expect in the wake of an experience like this. But most of them are appearances, visions, and that's why I take the stories of Paul this morning.

Paul had a shift in perception. We saw him first at the stoning of Stephen. There he is consenting to Stephen's death, this violent death which is the consequence of a religious absolutism and dogmatism that is threatened by any other understanding that believes somehow or other God is served by that kind of violent reaction. I suppose if it was the 21st century and if it was a part of the already boring and disgusting presidential campaign into which we find ourselves, it might have been Paul standing up and saying, 'I, Paul of Tarsus, approve of this martyrdom or this killing.' That's what he was doing. They laid their cloaks at his feet, the story said.

And then he is on his way to Damascus, still breathing out threats, ready to murder, ready to haul people into court, to bring them to Jerusalem bound, men and women, those who were followers of the Way, because Paul, this absolutist, this dogmatist, was an angry religious man (There is no anger like religious anger, there is no more obsessive-compulsive behavior than stems from bad religion, and Paul was the epitome of it.). And then there is the light and there is the voice. What's going on with Paul, how do we know? We could psychologize it all day long. Maybe there was something already simmering in his soul as he watched Stephen die. Maybe there was something in him, some decency in him that would betray the violence of his actions. But, in any case, he's a broken man and he's blinded, but then he sees. And after years of assimilation he becomes the Great Apostle who, in the midst of the Corinthian congregation of which he was the founder, in the midst of their own alienation and disturbances and divisions, could write to them of the indispensability of love, describing love in a beautiful fashion such that we call it the hymn of love and read it still with great profit.

Paul experienced a vision. For him, it was resurrection, and a shift in perception created for him a whole new life. That's what resurrection is. It is that movement from being all bound up to freedom. It is that movement from defensiveness and stinginess to graciousness and openness. It is the loosening up of all of that which binds us up inside and makes us less than we really want to be. That's resurrection. It is a shift in perception and it is a miracle.

I received an envelope full of goodies from my friend Jim Dykehouse through his mother, Nancy, this week and she said, "Jim gives you these things for you to throw away." Well, Jim always gives me packages of goodies which he clips down in Chicago, knowing that we live here in the boonies and we don't get much of that good stuff, so I always look forward to what Jim gives me. One thing I didn't throw away was a piece from the *Chicago Tribune*, entitled "The Enlightenment of an Old-School Pol," and written by Carol Marin. It is the story of Richard Mell. Richard Mell is an Alderman in Chicago; he was an old ward boss. Some of you are too young to remember the days when Chicago was crime-free because it was so corrupt at the top, when Richard J. Daley ruled and the old ward bosses kept everything in tight rein. Richard Mell was one of those. In the 80s he was rather notorious. His picture appeared with him standing on his desk, waving his arms. In 1987, there was an ordinance that was before the Cook County Commissioners asking for the protection of people of homosexual orientation from discrimination. The article reports,

...It was soundly defeated, 30-18. Mell was one of those who voted no. In response, gays in the packed gallery began singing "We Shall Overcome."

You can hear the regret in Mell's voice as he remembers turning to a colleague and saying, "What in the hell did we just do? This is the worst vote I've ever cast and I'll never do it again."

That vote took place on the eve of Deborah's 18th birthday and, though Dick Mell didn't know she was gay, he suspected it. Attractive and sensitive, he says, "she wasn't interested in boys." It would take two more years before she could tell him she was a lesbian.

In the 90s, Deborah moved to San Francisco where it was easier to be an openly gay person than at home in Chicago. She was gone nine years. Though there were family visits back and forth, Dick Mell talks about "the time we lost with each other - dinners, birthdays, little things."

She moved back home three years ago. You get the sense in talking to the alderman that, now that his daughter is back, he's not going to let her go or let her down....What Dick Mell has learned is what so many of us have figured out over time. It's that homosexuality has a name and face....On this point, Dick Mell knows that ordinary people are way ahead of most politicians. And he has his daughter to thank for that, something he did

last Thursday when he arrived at the police lockup where she was being held.

“I was worried he might be angry,” said Deborah. Far from it. “He had a huge smile on his face and hugged me. I started to cry. I think he started to cry. And he told me what a good daughter I am.”

A shift in perception is a miracle of love, and it frees us, and that's resurrection. It doesn't happen necessarily. One of the, in my estimation, most infamous leaders of the so-called Christian Right is Randall Terry. He's the head of Operation Rescue which aims at Planned Parenthood, and his inflammatory rhetoric has been responsible for the killings of abortion doctors in clinics. You perhaps have seen him on television. Most inflammatory rhetoric conceivable. In the May issue of *Out* magazine, coming to the newsstands this week, his son Jameel, 18 years old, writes an article in which he acknowledges that he is gay. Aaron Brown on CNN, one night last week, interviewed Randall Terry who expresses his grief and his pain, but who continues to spout that same hard line of the immorality of homosexuality and of the devastating judgment that will follow its acting out, and so on. At the end of the interview in his own inimitable style, Aaron Brown said, “Mr. Terry, this must be very difficult for you, but let me ask you just one question. In the light of this revelation from your son and his obvious pain, do you at all question some of the rhetoric and the tactics that you have used in the past?” And Randall Terry's answer in so many words was, “No.” Because Randall Terry would rather be right than loving and peaceful. So, it doesn't happen automatically. One has to be open to a miracle.

As I thought about that, I thought about my own experience. I remember, it must be 30 years ago now, getting a letter from a young man, a letter with pain such as I had never read on paper before, whose spirit was crushed, bruised, because a pastor had rejected him in his homosexuality. And I remember the next most painful letter I ever received, maybe a dozen years ago or so, same thing, only this time the rejection, like Randall Terry, was from a father. And I thought about my own experience, I thought about how fortunate I have been to meet people concretely in their humanity and to come to experience in that diversity, and to come to love them just as they are.

I thought about 14-15 years ago, when Rabbi David Hartman came to Muskegon and the Jewish-Christian Dialogue, and this man so full of the love of God, so overflowing with warmth, said, “Do you have to deny my truth to have your truth? Do you have to deny my joy to have your joy?”

That was the day he dialogued all day long with Krister Stendahl and those two beautiful human beings, one of the most brilliant and wonderful rabbis in the world and one of the most beautiful New Testament scholars in the world, and I saw them loving each other. Dear God, that's resurrection, that's a miracle of love, that's a shift in perception which has enabled me then to move fully into that arena with joy, with freedom.

Thanks to Boyd Wilson, our resident professor of World Religions at Hope College, who brought Diana Eck to Hope this past Tuesday. She gave a marvelous lecture. Nancy and I had dinner with her, so we know her, but it wasn't just that personal relationship. It was just this marvelous lecture in which she painted for us our world as it is. She was not saying our world ought to be this way or that way. She was saying this is the reality with which we live, this pluralistic reality, pluralism in religion, pluralism in peoples of all kinds mixing up in this great global community of which we are a part, like it or not, with all of its implications in every dimension of our life. As I sat there, I listened to her portraying in such a positive way the possibilities of the acceptance of the other and the diversity, not trying to wipe out all differences, but embracing one another and celebrating one another in our respective diversity, I felt so light and I felt so free and I felt so thankful to be able to say "Yes, yes!"

Then in the question and answer period, a young man stood up, well-spoken, respectful, who said, "I am an exclusivist." He made his witness very competently and very respectfully, and I looked at him and I loved him, because I saw in him myself when I was a student at Hope College who would have been threatened to death by this marvelous lecturer, this wonderful woman, wonderful scholar. I knew him, even though he doesn't know of himself what I know of him, and I project myself onto him, to be sure, but in doing so, I know that there's a knot in the pit of his stomach. I know that there is a defensiveness that rises within him. I know that there is an anxiety. There is a fear, a fear that has to be raised by the wonder of the stories that were told by this articulate scholar Diana Eck, and I thought of myself and thanked God for the kind of experiences that effect this shift in perception that have been, for me, resurrection.

This message is not about pluralism and religion in government, it is not about homosexual orientation or same-sex marriage, it is about a shift in perception, about that thing that puts a knot in your stomach and causes your face to flush and your blood pressure to rise. It's about those issues, whose button being pushed, you feel yourself uneasy, unsure, causing some of you, perhaps, to strike out vociferously, and others of you simply to slink into the shadows full of unease.

This sermon is about you and those things that are unresolved in your heart and your soul. God knows in our world today, polarized as we are about everything, we need to disband our egos long enough to allow the possibility of a shift in perception that can lead us from being bound up to freedom, from anger to peace, from violence to embrace in this global community which is so small that we have to learn how to celebrate one another in all of the diversity. This sermon is an invitation to you to be honest about the things that knot your stomach and mar your spirit and trouble your soul, an invitation to open yourself to a shift in perception which is a miracle of love which could be the first day of the rest of your life. I, Richard Rhem, recommend it.