

Love That Just Won't Give Up

Easter Sunday

*Luke 24:13-17, 28-35;
I John 1:1-4; 4:7-8; 12, 16*

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Easter 2005. Who would have dreamed I would be the preacher! Ian called a couple of weeks ago and asked if I would be willing to be the preacher for Easter, and I responded that I would be happy to be. He honors me thus and demonstrates his trust in me; I am grateful for that.

Reflecting back over the year, I went to my file of liturgies, as well as my daily calendar. If my notes are correct, the Lawtons arrived on March 22 a year ago. On March 28, which last year was the Fifth Sunday in Lent, I read a note of greeting and gratitude from Ian, promising to be present the next week which was Palm Sunday, April 4. And on Easter, April 11, Ian preached his first sermon here.

This invitation to preach at the end of Ian's first year with us provides an occasion to look back over that year – not that that was Ian's intention; nor do I intend to use the Easter sermon as a backward glance. Resurrection opens the future and I intend to get to that. But, I cannot pass up this opportunity to make a comment or two.

Many ask how I like retirement. My answer: I recommend it! I am delighted to be at this time in my life. The time was right; you created such a beautiful closure. I'm so content and, honestly, proud of the community I, with the team and lay leadership, was able to create, that I have no regrets. And I have let go. Some doubted I could. I knew I could and would and I have. The transition has happened. Transitions are not for the faint-hearted. Nobody said it would be easy. We had it so good for so long – 33 years! – and we were so comfortable.

But I knew it was time to catch the next wave and move this community to the next stage. This was the challenge we laid before Ian and I cannot imagine anyone coming in and doing it with greater courage and confidence, intelligence and passion than Ian has.

One realizes in such a transition there will be change but, of course, to know that intellectually is one thing; to feel it emotionally is another. Faced with the emotional shock, one must choose between trying to exercise power to hold on, hold back, resist the new movement and control the development, or, recognizing

the inevitability of change, and indeed the necessity of it, open one's being to the creative interchange that is occurring and trust the process in community to effect creative transformation. I sense most of us are following the second option and that is hopeful.

Last Sunday, Nancy and I remained for the Sermon Talk-back and many expressions were offered which reminded me of similar settings we experienced over the years and similar comments – for example:

“I can bring my family and friends here and know they will not be embarrassed;” and, “This is the first church I have been able to feel at home in.”

There were expressions, too, of love for and emotional attachment to the tradition; beloved symbols and rituals which move the heart and reach the depths of our beings.

I saw Ian listening, taking it in, and I'm sure desiring to continue to bridge past to future with sensitivity and care. And it is happening.

Lent has been for me once more a meaningful journey. The preaching has been strong and full of integrity. I am so thankful that there continues to be in this place honest and intelligent preaching that engages me.

I know there are some of you for whom the transition has not been comfortable, causing dis-ease and discontent. But, I must say honestly to you I believe that is the result more of style, not substance. I'll probably never forgive Ian for that metal bed frame hanging over my head, messing up the aesthetics of my sacred space! But, so what? That doesn't matter.

While in Florida, Nancy and I spent our annual evening with the VanHoeven clan: Gord and Dorothy, Doc and Shirley and Gord's brother Jim and his wife, Mary. After a fabulous fish fry which Doc prepared, we watched a bit of the Christmas Sunday service at which Ian's father preached, which they had on a DVD. I was really impressed; it was professionally produced and well done and I suspect one of these days folks around the globe will be able to experience the Sunday service from Christ Community – and, God knows, such an alternative the world desperately needs.

The title of my sermon is “Love That Just Won't Give Up.” Ian listed that to be his sermon title before he asked me to preach and I assured him I would stay with that. After all my years of preaching, I am able to twist any text or title to say what I want to say.

And that title affords me a bridge to my Easter message. Love that just will not give up is a claim that reveals the grain of the universe, that points to the Ultimate Mystery of Reality – and that is what I want to say this morning –

*Love is the Originating Mystery of the Cosmos
and that Love will never give up.*

The Gospels give us a variety of snapshots of the Easter story – snapshots, incidentally, that cannot be reconciled into a coherent picture. The Easter Gospel this morning from Luke 24, the narrative of the encounter of the risen one with two followers on the Emmaus Road, is my favorite, I suspect because I love the manner in which the revelation of the Easter miracle unfolds. Unrecognized, Jesus joins the disciples and joins their conversation. They are leaving Jerusalem in despair with sadness of heart in the wake of the crucifixion of Jesus. This one unknown reminds them of their scriptures and then, arriving at their home, they invite the stranger in who, though the guest, becomes the host at table and in the blessing and breaking of bread, is revealed as the Living One whose death they had been grieving.

Their eyes were opened even as he vanished from their sight and with amazement, they speak of how their sad hearts had become burning hearts and their grief transformed to joy, for they knew Jesus was alive and very much present to them. They rushed to tell their good news to the disciples, exclaiming he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread. Sadness to joy; Despair to hope, and the deep assurance that the love embodied in their Jesus could not be put to death, the realization that Love just won't give up.

I love Dom Crossan's comment on the Emmaus story:

Emmaus never happened. Emmaus always happens.

The Church has struggled so strenuously with the Easter Event – insisting on its historicity – that Jesus did, indeed, rise bodily from the tomb. And in the traditional interpretation of Jesus' death as an atonement for the sin of the world, I understand that need to insist that he arose from the grave, because that was the sign of sin removed and heaven opened to all who trusted him. The bodily resurrection was God's sign that salvation had been accomplished for us by him.

But, that has not been our understanding of Jesus' death for a long time. It must have been a dozen years ago that I suggested that Easter was not about the resuscitation of a corpse.

And I raised a few eyebrows and, here and there, a fever arose. (You forgive an old man and forget that his radical moves in the past caused you discomfort and confusion.)

It was Palm Sunday, 1993, when I preached “Jesus Died Because of our Sins, Not For Them.” For years there has been no atoning death preached here – my concise summary statement each Lent has been,

“He died the way he died because he lived the way he lived.”

And Ian has been preaching that eloquently. Jesus spoke Truth to Power in the best tradition of the Hebrew prophets. He challenged the power of the established Church and State. He came preaching the Kingdom of God, crying, “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is here.”

Repent is the English translation of the Greek word *Metanoia*, *Meta* the prefix meaning change, and *Noia* from *Nous*, for mind. Change your mind! Change your thinking!

Etymologically, *Metanoia* is the opposite of *Paranoia*, from which we have paranoia, irrational fear, delusional suspicion. Jesus’ message was,

Change your thinking! The old order of domination, oppression and human exploitation is doomed!

All too soon the Christian Church domesticated Jesus’ radical social/political claim and turned repentance into a moralistic call to turn from personal sins and peccadilloes. But, Jesus was talking about a different kind of sin – the institutionalized sin of imperial domination that oppressed the people.

Believe me, the authorities would have applauded him, not crucified him if he had preached “Keep your nose clean; obey the commandments and piously follow the tradition.” They would have subsidized him, popular as he was – he could sell family values, tax cuts for the wealthy, and the shredding of the social safety net so the poor might be stimulated to move to self-sufficiency.

No, Jesus proclaimed an alternative world marked by justice and fairness and compassion. He was judged a menace to established order and marked for death, the death of a social/political subversive.

But, that is where the Miracle occurred – On many Emmaus Roads over days and weeks, over months and years, gathered in community, sharing a meal, blessing and breaking bread, his followers sensed his presence and they knew all that had come to expression in him was true – and that truth could not be killed. The love he embodied just would not give up, because it was the reflection of the heart of the Originating Mystery of Being. That was Easter Faith – You can’t prove that, except by living its truth and that was the Easter Miracle: A shift in perception – and it is a shift in perception that transforms.

Such a shift in perception is the result of a moment of revelatory luminosity; a moment of unveiling of what is always everywhere the case. But, in a moment of disclosure, we see and, seeing, we come to a conscious awareness of a new possibility and we are transformed.

And what constitutes that transformation? What are the contours of the transformation effected by the shift in perception Easter brings about? Would it not be a transformation into the likeness of Jesus? Wouldn't one so transformed take on the mind of Jesus? The heart of Jesus? The agenda of Jesus?

Wouldn't that agenda, now translated into the great issues of Century 21, have some strong words about corporate corruption, about the unconscionable increase in CEO salaries when wages of the average worker have decreased? Have something to say about the Imperial Designs of this nation, even though woven with idealism? Raise questions about the dismantling of the social safety net and the re-distribution of wealth upward? Wonder about health care and education and the cities that face massive deficits?

The historical Jesus and the early Jesus Movement were too soon co-opted by the powers that be. Jesus was made into a Savior figure. The Cross, instead of being a sign of the death that results from speaking truth to power, was made into a symbol of salvation from sin and damnation and the Christian Church became a salvation cult.

All of this is old news here. But, with each returning Lent I wonder anew if we can really follow Jesus or are so locked into a social structure so at odds with his agenda that it would take a revolution to give the way of Jesus a chance.

I've been out of step all my life. I kid about it, but I am serious. Growing up in a wonderful home with all the love and security one could ask for, it was a very conservative religious and political environment – totally authentic and sincere. Religiously, as a child, I thought salvation would be limited to a narrow range of Christians – which certainly did not include Roman Catholics. You get the picture. The liberal Methodists in my little village were also out of luck, or beyond the pale. There was no "luck" involved.

Politically, the only option for a Christian was to be Republican. My first awareness of the political scene was the Presidential election of 1944. As a child of nine, I sensed FDR was the wrong choice. I imbibed real negativity toward him, knowing nothing, of course, and many years later having to recognize how twisted and warped was my estimate of one considered to be one of the greatest presidents this country has ever had.

In all of this – my home village, my religious affiliation, my political affiliation, such as it was, I felt in a minority, different, out of step with where the world was going. That only intensified my youthful commitments – didn't the Gospel quote

Jesus claiming, *The gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to Life and there are few who find it!*

Steered from the womb to the ministry, I studied and studied and studied. You know that – I tried so hard to support intellectually the nurture and conditioning of my childhood and youth and then the orthodoxy of the Church. I need not belabor this, but I remind you of the path I've traveled because I am Exhibit A of one who has undergone a dramatic shift in perception, for me a long process rather than a sudden awakening, but total, nonetheless.

And that shift in perception was for me a miracle, a miracle of resurrection and it has been transforming,

And it has made me out of step again as surely as I was as a child and youth. The shift came from meeting Jesus again for the first time, as Marcus Borg would say.

It was a Palm Sunday, April 15, 1984, when I preached a sermon entitled "Jesus, You Are Really Something!" It was the beginning of an encounter with the humanity of Jesus, disentangling him from the high Christological doctrines that the Church created in those early centuries as they lost the real human being – a loss which turned him into a savior figure, removing from him the prophetic edge that threatened Imperial Rome and got him crucified.

As has been characteristic of my journey, the progress was slow, but with each returning Lent I felt more sharply the disparity between the way of Jesus and the way we follow him. Slowly but surely, I knew to follow him would put me out of step again because as I was being sensitized to the practical implications for Christian faith and political commitment, religion and politics in this nation were moving to the right and the contrast with the agenda of Jesus as I have come to understand it grows ever more sharp. And, frankly, it is painful. So much about the political agenda of the nation troubles me; so much about most of the Church embarrasses me.

And it is because the shift in perception caused by encountering Jesus in his humanity transformed me, changed me – it was a miracle of resurrection because, you see, the really critical miracle is not some past event, but present transformation through a shift in perception.

That is the Easter miracle.
Emmaus never happened.
Emmaus always happens.

Jesus arose in the conscious awareness of those who had been his community. In the love he embodied they met the Ultimate Mystery, the Sacred Mystery which is the final truth in whom we live and move and have our being.

And that means Love is the Final Truth, Love by which every religious institution, every political agenda, every social program is to be judged, because Love expresses the Grain of the Universe, the Cosmic intention. And Love just will not give up.

Love – not sentimental sweetness, but tough, strong, marked by integrity, committed to the well-being of the other, refusing to respond in violence, taking the consequences.

Let me be clear; the Love of which I speak, the Love embodied in the flesh of Jesus, in his concrete behavior, is not some sentimental sweetness. It was Love that stood up against injustice, that protested human exploitation by religious-political systems and structures, that broke down social-religious barriers that excluded. It was non-violent Love, but not passive; Jesus' protest was concrete resistance which provoked and elicited reaction. And then, most amazing, a Love that received into itself the lethal consequences without hostile response; indeed, purveying grace and forgiveness to the end. It was such Love concretely lived out that put its stamp on the Jesus community.

From one of the early Christian communities we get the Fourth Gospel and the Letters of John. It was the Gospel that told the story of Jesus as "The Word became flesh" (John 1:14) – the central Christian affirmation of Incarnation, Jesus, the human as the embodiment of God. In the First Letter of John that theme is picked up. Listen to the concreteness of the experience:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands concerning the word of life.

In chapter 4, the writer says it straight out:

God is love.

And later he writes,

No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us....God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

To see that is a shift in perception; it is the Easter miracle; it is transforming.

The natural sciences probe the vast expanse of outer space and the amazing mysteries of sub-atomic particles. Cosmology seeks to unravel the secrets of the expanding universe and quantum physics the nature of energy fields in which that universe swims – a Reality marked by chance and necessity, randomness

and order. But, whatever its future unfolding in all its awesome splendor, the Cosmic Process has issued in the likes of us who know in our deepest core that Love is the Grain of the Universe, and that love lived out concretely brings to fullest, richest expression our humanity reaching toward Global Community.

Out of step, on the edge of despair at the present abuse of power and failure to protect the weakest members of the human community, I come to Easter; I experience again the Miracle of Resurrection; I know the Ultimate Movement of the Creative Spirit is toward the Light and the concretion of Love – and I believe again.

This present darkness will overreach and implode – because Love just won't give up!

A shift in perception – Resurrection, the Easter Miracle – *Change your minds!* Don't yield to the darkness; Light will dawn; Love will prevail.

That is true as broadly as the cosmos. It is true for the global community. It is true for this community –

But I cannot conclude without acknowledging that for some, perhaps for many, the darkness and pain is more personal – where you live with those you love, or those you have lost. Your own hurt is so deep you cannot begin to worry about the global community or the nation or even this community in transition. Perhaps Easter is just too bright; your pain just too deep.

Although you cannot take it in, let me nonetheless affirm that the cloud will lift, the darkness dissipate, and healing will ensue because Love just won't give up.

Let this Easter morning be a reassurance for you – Love will never give up. And we will make that love as tangible as this community in its embrace of you.

In these moments, open your heart to the new being Love creates, a shift in perception; the Easter Miracle which is transforming. And finally, know that

All will be well,
All will be well
All manner of things will be well.