

Practicing Resurrection
John 20:1-18
April 1, 2018
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We are so glad you are here today and have chosen to worship with us at Crestwood. I've preached a lot of Easter sermons, and I'm amazed at how nervous I still get every year, because this is such an honor, to share a word with you on this most holiest of all days. You could have chosen to worship somewhere else, or not worship at all, so please know that no matter how often you come to Crestwood, you are welcome here and we pray you have a very blessed Easter.

For the last six weeks, during the season of Lent, we've been talking about different ways we can put our faith into practice in order to grow as a follower of Christ. Becoming better Christians takes practice, just like you have to practice piano or dance or lacrosse in order to get better at those activities. We looked at practicing things like saying yes and saying no, forgiveness, and healing, in order to get better at living out our faith.

All those things are important for us to do in order to become more Christ-like, but all of those other practices are predicated on one particular practice, which is what we're looking at today. None of the other parts of our faith matter if we don't practice living out the one event that defines our faith, the one thing that infuses all the other things with significance: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. A life of faith only makes sense when it's viewed through the lens of the resurrection. For Christians, this is the greatest day of the year. Christmas wouldn't make sense without Easter. Why celebrate the birth of someone who is going to die like everyone else? Maundy Thursday and Good Friday wouldn't make sense without Easter. Why commemorate his last meal and his death on the cross if that's where the story ends? But that's not where it ends. There's more to this story for us to understand.

But that's hard! Even though I don't always do it well, I can practice saying yes and saying no or offering forgiveness because I know what it means to do those things. But what does it mean to practice resurrection? I feel like I need to understand what it is I'm practicing before I start doing it. Someone could hand me a mallet and some colored balls and a few metal wickets and say, "Now, go practice croquet!" But it doesn't do me any good unless I know what I'm practicing. So, what is this resurrection thing which we are called to live out in our lives of faith?

Well, I don't know. That's the frustrating part, right? After all, you're paying me to know the answer to those kinds of questions. I spent 14 years in seminary – maybe it only felt that long – and the resurrection still defies explanation. Even those who were on the scene couldn't make sense of it, so what hope do we have? When Mary discovers the empty tomb, her default answer was that someone had taken the body. That was the only rational explanation, right? I didn't even occur to Mary that Jesus might have been brought back from the dead. Those things don't happen. This isn't a zombie movie. Jesus wasn't a vampire. Dead bodies stay dead, and Mary knew for a fact that Jesus was dead. So when the body is gone, resurrection isn't even an option, because it doesn't make sense.

We really shouldn't be surprised, you know, because there's very little about Easter that does make sense. Can anyone tell me the date for Christmas next year? How about two years from now? Sure, it's Dec. 25th. That never changes. What about the date for Easter next year? Or two years from now? I don't know. It's never the same. I think the date is set by multiplying the

circumference of the earth by the wind chill factor, then dividing half of that number by Pi – don't forget to carry the three – and then factoring in the square root of the lunar equinox. Whatever formula is used, I haven't figured it out, just like I haven't figured out the resurrection.

Here's the thing: do we have to understand resurrection in order to practice it? Because if we do, there's really not hope for any of us. We're all going to be stuck at the empty tomb, scratching our heads, trying to figure out what happened, while Jesus is over there in the garden saying, "Why are you trying to figure this out? That's not why I'm here." Jesus didn't say, "Understand me." He said, "Follow me," which means following him into the darkness of the empty tomb in order to live out the joy of Easter. Maybe we're not meant to understand the empty tomb; maybe we are simply meant to be amazed by it, and to let that amazement be the lens through which we view the rest of our lives.

When I was in college, I was struggling with an advanced French class, so I wrote my high school French teacher about my frustration. Her postcard reply contained only one sentence: "Before you can understand, you have to admit you don't understand." Of course, she wrote it in French, so it took me forever to figure it out. That's the paradox of how resurrection works. The more we admit we don't understand it, the more we see of it. The more I admit I don't understand how God hears everyone's prayers, the more answered prayers I hear. The more I admit to not knowing how God can love everybody, the more evidence I see of God's love around me. The more I confess I don't understand how God works, the more I see God working in and through this church. The more I surrender myself to a faith in what I don't understand, the more I see and experience the One who understands me. I can't explain the resurrection, but I've experienced the power of resurrection over and over in my life.

Practicing the resurrection doesn't require understanding it. It simply requires the courage to let all aspects of our lives be refracted through it. It's like a prism. You know how a prism works, right? A light beam shines onto it, and it breaks the light into all different colors of the rainbow. When we let the light of our lives pass through the prism of Christ's resurrection, it fills our lives with a spectrum of colors that reflect the multi-colored love of God for each of us.

What does look like in real life? How do we practice resurrection? It means we live as if Christ is really alive, not dead. It means trusting that God is at work in this world to bring about good, even when we can't see it. It means we live with hope in the face of despair. It means we live with courage in the face of fear. It means we live with grace in the face of judgment. It means we work for justice in the face of injustices. It means stepping out in faith to help someone when it would be easier and safer to keep to ourselves. And frankly, that's really hard to do. Sometimes I think life would be easier – or at least more comfortable – if Jesus had just stayed dead.

We know in our hearts today whether we believe the resurrection is real. If we believe it isn't, then there's nothing we need to do. Our lives aren't changed by today's event. But if we believe it IS true, then starting today, we have work to do. So here's my question for us: If we believe Christ was raised from the dead, what is keeping us from taking that step closer to God by practicing resurrection? Do our lives reflect our belief that Christ is alive? Do the words we say, the choices we make, our calendars, our checkbook reflect our belief that Christ is alive, or do they make it look as if we think Christ is still dead? How will tomorrow be different for you because of what happened today? Because if we say "He is risen!" with our lips but say "He is still dead" with our lives, then he is still dead.

I believe he's alive. I believe he was alive back then and is still alive now, and that reality compels me to live with a resurrection perspective, a perspective that accepts the resurrection

cannot be explained. It can only be experienced. We come to church looking for proof of the resurrection, looking for proof of God, and yet, we already have it. In The Color Purple, Alice Walker writes, "...have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God." We come looking for evidence the resurrection, but we ARE the evidence of the resurrection, because we experience it all the time in our relationships, in our health, in our jobs. Some resurrections are so big they get written about in the Bible. But other resurrections are small and happen every day in the midst of ordinary lives.

The challenge for us to practice resurrection is that, in order for resurrection to happen, something has to die. Endings can feel so final, can't they? The ending of life, the ending of a relationship, the ending a dream we realize isn't going to come true. We are tempted to get stuck in mourning the way things used to be. If only we could go back to the beginning, instead of being submerged in the ending. Endings are so final.

But not for Jesus. Remember, he cried out from the cross, "It is finished," not "I am finished." He still had work to do, and through his resurrection we are reminded that God can bring new beginnings out of painful endings. It happens every single day. Someone picks up the phone and says, "I'm sorry." Resurrection. Someone shares a cup of coffee with a potential soulmate. Resurrection. A job opportunity opens up that you never expected. Resurrection. We practice resurrection by believing it is still happening every day and keeping our eyes open for it, so that when it happens, we can say, "There! There's God at work!"

If you leave this place today and Jesus is still dead for you, then I'm sorry I made you sit through this, because nothing is going to change for you. But if you believe Jesus is alive, if you believe that our God is a God of new beginnings, if you believe resurrection is not a noun describing a past event but a verb describing an ongoing action, then tomorrow should be different than today, because tomorrow, you can practice living out what you learned here today. God is opening up tombs all around us, and the things we thought were dead are coming back to life. My prayer for you is that you practice resurrection by looking for the ways God is at work around you and showing others what Christ's love means for them. Maybe you've believed that all your life. Maybe you're believing it for the first time today. Doesn't matter. What matters is that, because of what God did today, you have new life. Something that used to be dead is starting to bloom. Now, go practice what you have learned here. Shine your resurrection light into this dark, dreary, scary world, which needs to know the multi-colored love of God more than ever. God and practice resurrection. Happy Easter!