

“Here I am”

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Lake Forest Presbyterian Church

Today’s scripture is from the Revised Common Lectionary, but not intended for this week. As we stand with our toes on the edge of summer, and spring all around us, thoughts of resurrection call us. Here, Paul speaks of the death and resurrection of Christ which is usually placed in the season of Eastertide. Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth is full and rich, and we need to read the entire letter to even get a glimpse of what is happening in Corinth.

When we read just a small section – or a pericope as it is called (that fun word,) we miss much of what the writers of scripture are teaching us. It is like introducing someone to your favorite pizza, and their bite is only cheese, they miss the sausage and pepperoni that gives it flavor.

When we read a small part we can miss the true meaning. If we read only about Jesus feeding the 5,000 we miss the context. If we don’t hear his call for us to love our neighbor as ourselves. We feed people because Jesus calls us to care for each other. Without that part of the message, we see a miracle, but miss the truly miraculous that of Jesus calling us to servant lives. Resurrecting us to work that is greater than ourselves.

Paul is writing to the church he established in Corinth. Corinth was a bustling place, both commercially and religiously. There were Greek and Egyptian shrines alongside the Roman Imperial Cult. There were plenty of idols for worshipping. And remember, the Christians in Corinth were primarily gentiles. They did not have the long tradition of the Jewish faith as structure. Wealth and status were important in Corinth. It was not a small fishing village or an agrarian settlement.

In this letter Paul has lots of issues. He is not angry with them, as he seems to be in 2 Corinthians, here he is their teacher and he is instructing them. One of the many issues Paul addresses in this letter is the understanding of some over bodily resurrection. It was hard for some of the people to grasp. Many understood the body to be corrupt, so they believed that it was spiritual rather than physical. They would translate it to fit their understanding. It made it easier for them to make it fit into their worldview. We do that too, because it is easier for us as well. When we take snippets of scripture, we can make it fit with our personal beliefs.

We need to remember that context is everything, the mantra students hear continually in seminary. Paul was their teacher, handing on the faith to them and it was vital to Paul that they got it right. And as he highlights the value of handing on the faith, it is vital for us.

The church in Corinth is not acting like a community. They are situated in a culture that is divided between those that have and those that have nothing. People of different standing who have different backgrounds and education.

Paul writes to remind them of what is essential – that Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and rose from that death. This belief is what makes them different. These are the stories that were handed on to Paul and the early Christians, traced from person to person. Recent firsthand accounts of resurrection.

The church today has many of the same issues. There are endless idols that can distract us from our focus on God. Wealth and status, like in Corinth, are just two.

In the situation in Corinth, it appears it would be incredible to get a Christian foothold. To have people believe in community, each other, might look impossible. But, as Paul reminds them, and us, the grace of God can do anything. Paul must remind them again what they believe, and the impossibility of what we believe has been proclaimed and witnessed to us by many – the women at the tomb, Cephas, then to the Twelve, the five hundred brothers and sisters, James, then to all the apostles, Paul, and we can add the saints that came after: Luther, and Calvin, the Wesleys, your grandparents, and parents, Sunday school teachers, and friends, and finally we can each say me. We are the ones to pass on the stories, our faith. It was different in Corinth and it has been different in every city since, but we pass it on, just as Paul did in his ministry. Resurrecting our faith journeys in new ways.

It is interesting that even as Paul was critical of the culture of Corinth, he did not ask them to retreat, he does not lead them off into Qumran-like isolation. He encourages them to stay planted where they are, to change their behavior and to love each other. To be radically different people. To be a people of resurrection. To lead others to resurrection hope in Christ.

We are also called to be radically different people, resurrection people. Who love instead of hate, who welcome all not just those like us. With us as with those in Corinth, Paul testifies to us about the grace of God. How grace overpowered him, changed his life. Resurrected him. It was not something he controlled, it was Christ. In a fractured culture, rising out of a pandemic, we stand here today and proclaim what we believe. That we believe in resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus, of our lives, of the earth. The waters of baptism refresh our memories; reminds us of who it is that calls us, and what we believe.

Saying the words that Jesus was crucified, dead and buried, and rose again, we say them at almost every baptism, confirmation, and ordination.

Today is Trinity Sunday, and again we will proclaim what we believe. We baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In this we are a community, the body of Christ. A community surrounded by the grace of a God who reaches out to us first, and never leaves us.

We see the fullness of that grace in the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving before the Lord's Supper. We tell the story of the people turning away from God over and over throughout the ages, and God's grace bringing them back. God loving them broken and shattered, loving us, resurrecting us.

So, as we go out to hand on our faith know that no one does it alone. Following God means a life under the transforming power of Grace.

Grace not only transforms us individually, but it transforms our relationships to the community around us. Grace resurrects the community, and Grace is so needed now. Not judgement, which is in ample supply these days. What do we lose by offering grace? Love? We gain when we reach out and offer welcome, love, and grace.

Resurrection happens through the grace of God every day. It is all around us. Relationships are healed, situations that seem hopeless change. The earth does not hide resurrection from us. Flowers that bloom after a harsh winter, sap that warms in the trees feed branches that bloom leaves. Babies are born and we bring them into the community through baptism.

Wangari Maathai, the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize, connected environmental degradation and poverty among rural Kenyan women and built a movement to address both. In 1977, she founded the Green Belt Movement that had planted 30 million trees by the 21st century. This has stopped erosion, replenished firewood supplies, and helped clean the air. Maathai did this work in response to her call as a Christian. Resurrection work proclaims that God has a yes beyond death.

This memorial day we honor those in the military who have given the ultimate sacrifice, their lives, for the freedom of this country. I don't think they did this for the purple mountains or the grain, they did it for the people they love and the people of this country. Our hope and belief in the resurrection is seen in their actions as well.

These words from Paul can sound harsh. In our Wednesday Bible Study we heard them in a translation that offered a healing and encouraging message. We read the scripture in a few different translations, and we read Eugene Peterson's The Message. The Message is Peterson's personal paraphrased translation from the original languages of the Bible. A translation originally written for his congregation.

It reads: But because God was so gracious, so very generous, here I am. And I'm not about to let his grace go to waste. Haven't I worked hard trying to do more than any of the others? Even then, my work didn't amount to all that much. It was God giving me the work to do, God giving me the energy to do it. So whether you heard it from me or from those others, it's all the same: We spoke God's truth and you entrusted your lives.

The good news today is that we are still being given work to do, and the energy with which to do it from God. When we speak, we must speak God's truth as we pass on that which has been passed on to us. Hope and belief in the resurrection. Amen.