

**Saving Paradise
Easter Sunday,
April 12, 2009
The United Church of Gainesville
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Sandy: The story of the resurrection in the four gospels is like a Fourth of July fireworks rocket tube that takes off in a single streamlined blaze. The rocket tube, the common denominator in all four stories, is that women went to Jesus' tomb, early on the first day of the week, and they found the stone rolled away. Matthew refers to these women as Mary of Magdala and the other Mary. Mark says Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome. Luke simply refers to them as women. And John says it was Mary of Magdala alone.

Larry: Then the details of the four stories break open like that fireworks rocket exploding into a dazzling array of cascading lights. One gospel alone can't contain all the bright stars, all the recollections of the experience. And so it is, that we find in the Gospel of Luke, the account of two men suddenly appearing in the tomb, dressed in dazzling white, who ask the women, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:6).

It's a very good question. Why do we seek the living among the dead at Easter? Why do we look for the experience of resurrection in the darkness of the tomb?

We do this because the church has taught us, from seemingly time immemorial, that the crucifixion of Jesus was the central event, the core of the Christian faith, and that by his death, Jesus saved the world. We have been taught that humankind was so inherently sinful and had betrayed God's promises so incessantly that the only way to make us worthy again of God's love was for God to sacrifice God's son who atoned for our sins by dying in our place, opening the gates to heaven for all who believed in him. Most Lenten and Easter hymns proclaim this message. We saw it with full-blown blood and violence in Mel Gibson's film, "The Passion of the Christ".

Sandy: It is this focus on Jesus' death that sends us to empty tombs. Yet there is an ever-growing chorus of biblical scholars and theologians who are questioning this emphasis on how suffering in and of itself is God's will and therefore in and of itself is the noble way to salvation. These contemporary scholars and theologians, like the prophets of old described by Isaiah have been separate and distant voices crying in the wilderness. But each year, it seems, these voices are growing and coalescing to say that Jesus was a holy man whose life of compassion, justice and peace ultimately collided with the Roman Empire's values of power and greed. These voices are saying that we human beings were not born in sin that we inherited from the Garden of

Eden, but rather that we were born in blessing, with God's love and grace surrounding us all our lives, beginning at our birth.

Larry: Over the years, we have heard this theology of blessing emerging in the works of Matthew Fox, Marcus Borg, Susan Thistlethwaite, John Shelby Spong, Elaine Pagels and J. Philip Newell, to name a few. We've found their Biblical insights and perspectives to be compelling. Just this past year, we read a new book, Saving Paradise, by two outstanding biblical theologians, Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker. In it they share a remarkable discovery, one of those treasures hidden in plain sight, in their research on the history of Christian art.

Brock and Parker essentially asked themselves the same Easter question, "Why do we search for the living among the dead?" Why is the living Christ bound up in the burial cloths of crucifixion? So they went looking for answers in Christian art and artifacts from the first centuries after Jesus' death. They searched the paintings on the walls of the Roman catacombs and underground tunnels, dating from the first 900 years of the Christian era. They did not find one painting of a dead Jesus, not one painting of a crucifix as we would know it, not even one.

Sandy: Brock and Parker continued their search in the early churches of Istanbul, and in the fifth and sixth century mosaics of Ravenna, Italy. Again, there were no scenes of crucifixion. Instead all the Christian images they found were of Jesus as a healer, a teacher, and one who defeated death. In a 6th century Italian church, the mosaic images place beauty at the heart of creation: birds, sheep, lilies, daisies, a green meadow on which the earth rests, with silver and gold stars, and a large golden cross transecting the center. From the middle of that cross, the tiny bearded face of Christ peers directly out: Jesus at the heart of the cosmos, a presence shining with light. Other churches from the same era depict paradise as a story of divinity in this world, made visible in deeds of justice, mercy, healing, and compassion, with Jesus seated near his mother in the middle of vast meadows.

Repeated images of the dead body of Jesus hanging on a cross did not appear in religious art until the tenth century. The melody of Jesus' grace, of the Jesus whose life gave us glimpses of heaven on earth and images of paradise in this world and in heaven, sang for a thousand years before the doctrine of original sin and atonement became Christianity's central theme.

Larry: Why did this melody of faith change so radically in the tenth century? When the Holy Roman Empire through Charlemagne conquered northern Europe, it imposed Christianity on the native peoples of that continent. As the empire spread, the church emphasized the threat of eternal punishment to keep order and control over the population. Suffering in and of itself was validated as a noble sign of faith. It is this theology that you will see in any major cathedral in Europe, with

paintings, sculptures, frescoes, and stained glass windows depicting the suffering and death of Jesus in endless repetition.

Sandy: So, my friends, if we do not come here this morning to seek the living among the dead, then as Jesus says to Mary Magdalene at the tomb in the Gospel of John, who are we looking for? And that is a good question for each of us to ask ourselves. When you got up this Easter morning and decided that on this particular Sunday you would come to church, who were you seeking?

I came here this morning seeking the living Jesus, seeking an affirmation of resurrection, of new life in God who is still speaking in this world, and who still speaks to me. I came here this morning to touch the Jesus I believe in, who has shaped my life and my faith. We want to share with you four ways that we understand and affirm the resurrection.

Larry: First, I believe in the resurrection as an affirmation that the ways of God are ultimately more powerful than the ways of empires and nations, than the ways of our dominant culture. Marcus Borg has an interesting perspective on the death of Jesus. He says that Jesus could have died on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, beaten like the man by the side of the road in the story of the Good Samaritan. He could have died from a terrible disease, contracted from any of the many people he healed. But, Borg says, it was significant that Jesus was executed by Roman officials because his values, his teachings and his actions were in stark contrast to the Roman occupation. The Roman Empire killed him to silence his threat to their control.

But executing Jesus did not destroy the truth or power of what he taught and believed. In the resurrection experiences of Jesus' followers, their faith and their embodiment of his love survived, became stronger and eventually conquered the very system that tried to destroy Jesus.

Sandy: The story of Jesus' resurrection shows us that you can kill the prophet, but you cannot kill God's message. As Martin Luther wrote, "The body they may kill, God's truth abideth still." We know this power of resurrection through contemporary prophets like Bishop Oscar Romero, like Sister Dorothy Day, like Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. The dominant culture, which today still maintains that we should feed our greed, that we should fear those who are different, that the poor deserve their lot, and that our goal in life is to look out for ourselves - that culture still seeks to crucify the dreamers and their hopes. The resurrection that I believe in says, "No. Evil has not the last word, nor does power nor greed."

Larry: God still speaks and calls us to life and to witness. Every time a person says no to the status quo and challenges things as they are, every time a group of high schoolers says yes to a spring break mission trip to restore ravaged homes to people in need, every time a church says yes to welcoming all people or to housing the homeless, every time a

community says no to discrimination and no to violence, Jesus who was crucified arises to live the dream again.

Sandy: Second, I believe in resurrection as a powerful spiritual transformation. It may surprise you to know that the oldest accounts we have of the resurrection are not in the Gospels but instead in the writings of Paul, around 20 years after Jesus died. Paul never physically met Jesus. He never heard him teach. He never experienced the empty tomb. But Paul had a spiritual encounter with the resurrected Jesus that transformed his life and that kept transforming his life every day after.

Larry: One of the things Paul says in 1st Corinthians 15 is that we are born as a physical body; we are resurrected as a spiritual body. He says that resurrection does not happen only when we die; it happens in the midst of our lives when we encounter the powerful presence of God, when, as Sandy talked about two weeks ago, we let go of our roles and titles, and we know who we truly are, that eternal soul deep within our being. Paul's encounter with what he describes as the risen Christ on the road to Damascus was not an encounter with a flesh and blood corpse now walking around alive. Paul encountered a presence, a power, that summoned him to do something better with his life than to persecute Christians.

Sandy: I believe in that resurrection right here in the midst of my life, a spiritual resurrection that allows me to see God's truth that I had been blind to, that allows me to hear God's call, as the hymn says, "to seek other shores," that transforms me to live differently, and that allows me yet another chance. "Who do I seek?" I seek Jesus who transforms me, and sets me on new paths of faith and service.

It is interesting that the world's religions call us through holy figures who embody this power of transformation. Buddha, Mohammed, White Buffalo Woman, Moses, Shiva, come to us not as grand ideas, but as humans filled with the blazing light of their creator. I seek that human face of God in Jesus, the one who calls me by name.

Larry: Third, I believe in the resurrection of the spirit, in what Rita Brock and Rebecca Parker call the realm of the dead, which is connected to us, we who are living, but is separated by a thin veil through which the dead can pass to accompany, guide and bless us. In the language of Celtic Christianity, it is said that the veil between heaven and earth is paper thin. I believe that we can experience the presence of those we love who have died, in dreams, in visions, in words that come from nowhere out of our mouths, in sudden epiphanies and intuitions. I believe that the spirit of Jesus lives in me and walks with me, when I encounter those tough places and hard decisions of my life. I believe that when I die, I shall enter that realm of the living souls across that thin veil and I will be held not only in God's shining love but also in connection with those I love who are still living.

Sandy: Fourth, I believe that resurrection opens the gift of paradise to me. This paradise, as Jesus' life and death and resurrection shows us, is a multidimensional reality, simultaneously of this world and of heaven also. We have the gift of paradise in the beauty of creation we can experience every day. We have the gift of paradise in the rebirth of our own hearts and souls. Yet resurrection reminds me of an even richer gift of paradise, in the gift of community, in the gift of the church, in the gift of the never easy task of living well with one another on this earth. We do not find paradise by just wishing for a better world or by waiting until we have died. We find it by embracing life's aching tragedies and life's boundless joys, by working for justice and for peace, by honoring the dignity of all peoples, and by rooting our lives in grace and service.

Larry: We hope that we, and in turn you, may remember two things today. Do not seek the living among the dead. Our God is a living God who is found in the love and justice that triumph over fear and division.

Sandy: Second, remember what you look for, whom you seek. Seek resurrection that transforms us in blessing, every day, and offers, even when all seems lost and we feel forsaken, glimpses of paradise, a Garden of Eden recovered, both in this world and the next.

In the words of the sixteenth century monk, Fra Giovanni, "At this time I greet you, not quite as the world sends greetings, but with profound esteem and with the prayer that for you, now and forever, the day breaks and the shadows flee."