

The Art of Resurrection: From Certainty to Openness

Isaiah 65:17-25

Sermon by Mark Schloneger

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*“See, I will create
new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I will create,
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight
and its people a joy.
I will rejoice over Jerusalem
and take delight in my people;
the sound of weeping and of crying
will be heard in it no more.*

*“Never again will there be in it
an infant who lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not live out his years;
the one who dies at a hundred
will be thought a mere child;
the one who fails to reach a hundred
will be considered accursed.
They will build houses and dwell in them;
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.*

*No longer will they build houses
and others live in them,
or plant and others eat.
For as the days of a tree,
so will be the days of my people;
my chosen ones will long enjoy
the work of their hands.
They will not labor in vain,
nor will they bear children doomed to
misfortune;
for they will be a people blessed by the LORD,
they and their descendants with them.*

*Before they call I will answer;
while they are still speaking I will hear.
The wolf and the lamb will feed together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox,
and dust will be the serpent’s food.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,”
says the LORD.*

(Isaiah 65:17-25, NIV)

On Friday, Good Friday, many of us gathered in this very space.

Together, we said:

Look and see the shadow of sin.

Look and see the weight of the world.

Look and see the suffering of our savior.

Look and see the sorrow of Jesus Christ.

We sang hymns.

We prayed to our forgiving, reconciling,
loving, suffering Lord.

We read scriptures --

Jesus, hanging,
the people, watching,
the leaders and soldiers, mocking,

Mary, the mother, and Mary Magdalene,
witnessing their love's execution,
Jesus, dying.
Jesus, dead.

We blew out the candles,
and we sat in in silence,
the cross lying on the floor,
dark shadows creeping larger through the windows.
Then, we left.

Several years ago, an artist friend told me about a stained-glass window
that she had made completely from scratch.
She gave the glass colors and textures and shapes, she said,
and she carefully, painfully put it together,
piece by piece, hour by hour, day by day, months.
She fulfilled her vision of beauty
with pieces of glass that had become pieces of her.

I couldn't see her window with my eyes, of course,
but, when she described it,
I didn't need my eyes to see.
In my mind, I looked at what she had made,
and it was good.
It was very good.

She told me that art cannot be separated from place,
and that she had made this particular piece for a particular place.
She didn't make it to sell.
She didn't make it to show or to exhibit.
It wasn't meant for a church building.
She didn't even make it for herself, or her family, or her friends.

No, the artist took her stained-glass window,
and she went where people warn you not to walk,
to the "bad" part of the city,
to the valley of the shadow,
to an abandoned building in Providence, Rhode Island
with walls inscribed with profanity and floors covered in trash.
That's where she installed it, she said,
offering it for free,
to fill one empty window in one empty place.

And in my mind's eye,
I could just see it there.

Can you?
It was perfect.
I saw the sun shining through her window's stained glass,

radiating its brilliant purples and pinks and blues and greens,
coloring the emptiness inside and out,
for everyone to enjoy, for no one to possess.

A sacred space in a forsaken place,
a beautiful gift of surprising grace.

The morning after she installed her window,
the artist returned to the building, just to look.

It didn't even last twelve hours.

The stained-glass window
that was embedded with her blood, her body, and her being,
was lying in a corner, broken, bent, and tagged with spray paint,
its pieces of glass, pieces of her, strewn across the cement.

It hurt her,
deeply, she said,
still aching, still grieving.

Come on, this couldn't have surprised you.

Did you really think something like that
could exist somewhere like that?

You can't leave your art, your valuables, anything beautiful, unprotected.
They need to be locked up, guarded, or you will lose it.

It's the first day of the week.

and it's early, the hours of the nighttime morning.

Another woman returns to another abandoned building.

She walks in darkness to the tomb of her hope.

She's grieving the loss of her light,
the one who illuminated her, her life, her world.

The body of the one through whom she saw herself and her God most clearly,
lays lifeless, broken, shrouded in darkness.

She is going to say goodbye, to pay her respects, to lay her flowers.

She is doing what she needs to do,
observing the rituals that she needs to observe,
so that she can simply go on, without.

This woman is Mary, of course.

She walks in the darkness to give death its due.

When she sees the rolled-away stone,
Mary makes the only logical conclusion:
they have robbed the body of Jesus.

It was like death was doing a victory dance
long after the outcome had been decided.

It must have hurt her. . . deeply,
adding ache upon her aching,
grief upon her grieving.

Yes, I'm aware that this is Easter morning.
Yes, I smell the lilies beside me,
Yes, I have on my best and only suit,
and I'm wearing a new tie.

We've sung soaring hymns.
We've exchanged the Easter greetings.
But I'm sorry, this story, your story, our story, the world's story,
it begins in darkness.

This is the darkness that must be faced,
when your life has not gone as planned,
when ones you love die way too soon.

When you find yourself waiting inside
yet another white-walled room with Wal-Mart art
surrounded by monitors and beeps and tubes and charts.

When you're forced to face death because death is facing you
or someone you love,
in a way that is much more than a vague and distant idea.

When you realize, finally, that you won't receive the love you've needed
from the people from whom you've sought it.

When you don't know where and when your next meal will come.

When bombs fall like rain in Ukraine like today.

When a Congolese refugee fleeing violence for the hope of peace in Grand Rapids
is pulled over for mismatched license plates
and is killed by a police officer,
executing the law and Patrick Lyoya.

All of these hold the darkness of the tombs that beckon our bodies
They are the shadows threatening to snuff out our lives.

"In a world of certainty,
of cause and effect,
of established rules as to what can happen and how,
[in a world with tombs] that allow only for the old and familiar to occur,
Mary's logic is right on target:"
death is celebrating its victory and now asks us to dance.¹

What other explanation is there?

Just thinking about these things makes you want to run as fast as you can.

And so we run. Mary runs. Peter runs. The other disciple runs.

¹ Catherine Taylor, "Who Are You Looking For?" *Journal for Preachers* 28 (Easter 2005: 31) [quoting Walter Brueggemann, *Texts for Preaching A* (Westminster John Knox, 1995), 262.

She runs away, but then together they come back
to the tombs' gaping black hole.

And now, well now, it's CSI Jerusalem:
Simon Peter and the other disciple investigate the scene.

One sees linen wrappings lying inside.
That one remains on the perimeter,
the other one enters the interior.
Linen wrappings confirmed,
and the victim's head cloth is rolled up and off by itself.
This is the evidence, the only evidence:
the rolled away stone, the empty tomb, the linens, the head cloth.
For one, that's enough to believe something and to understand nothing.

Based on this evidence alone, there are many possible explanations.
Based on this evidence alone, no one can say for sure what happened.
No one was there. There were no eye-witnesses.
No, what happened inside that tomb cannot be understood
with circumstantial evidence.

The two disciples return to their homes,
Move along, folks, nothing more to see here.
How can you attest for what isn't?
What can you prove by an absence?
How can you speak words never said?

But Mary, she stays. Alone.
She's weeping. She will not be consoled.
She sees two angels, and they see her.
But those angels, they will not spread news
that is for another to tell.
No, they are simply the power of God
seeing and caring for a woman in distress.
"Woman, why are you weeping?" they ask.
"They have taken away my Lord," she says
and I don't know where they have put him."
Another voice. "Woman, why are you weeping?
Who are you looking for?"
"Tell me where they have put him," she pleads.
"Mary," Jesus said.
When he said her name, she recognized her Lord.

Jesus is risen!
He is risen indeed!

There is a power beyond the grave, a light stronger than the darkest dark.
A power that sees your grief, knows your fear, and then calls your name.
The power that death cannot hold
 is the same power at work in us.
And that power is in Jesus Christ our Lord.

No one can prove to you what happened inside that tomb,
 but I have seen the art of resurrection.
I have seen the art of resurrection in those who have left the former things behind
 and are following the way of Christ
I have seen the art of resurrection in those who live and leave their lives,
 though doors marked service entrance only.
I have seen the art of resurrection in people planting 700 trees that look like twigs
 as a way of blessing this land for generations to come
 even though they may never see their glory.
I have seen the art of resurrection in those
 who welcome, and test, and treat and care for sick people
 throughout a global pandemic.
I have seen the art of resurrection in you.
In the name of Jesus, you are the art of resurrection.

Jesus is risen!
He is risen indeed!

There is a stained-glass window sitting in a corner
 of an abandoned building in Providence, Rhode Island.
The artist left it there,
 and I like to think that it's still there.
It wasn't hers to possess, she said.
She has no regrets, she said.
What a waste, some might say.
Not us.

Because we say, in the name of Jesus,
 the powers of death and destruction
 at loose in this world
 will not have the last word.
Because we say that we will no longer live
 as if our bodies and our lives
 are ours to secure for ourselves, ours to possess for ourselves, ours to lose.
No, they are ours to give.
Because we say that, in the name of Jesus,
 what falls down in death
 will at one time rise back up in life
What falls down
 will at one time rise back up!

And so rise up with your bodies or with your hands.
(People stand up)

You are the art of resurrection,
and through you,
through the church the world over,
through people and places we'd never expect,
God's light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness cannot overcome it.

Today, this morning, in this season of Easter that never ends,
we proclaim that in Jesus all the tombs holding the world's darkness
will one day open to display the gallery of God's resurrection art.
And, today, this morning, we live into that reality because of this reality:

Jesus is risen!
He is risen indeed!

Art cannot be separated from place, my friend said,
and this art is made for a particular place.
It wasn't made to sell.
It wasn't made to be preserved or protected in glass.
It wasn't even made just for ourselves or our families
or to be kept in a church building.

No, the art of resurrection
is meant for those places
where people warn you to avoid,
the hidden, abandoned places,
the "bad" part of the city, the dark places in you,
the valley of the shadow,
the pit of our shame.

That's where this art is installed
and it's free.

In the name of Jesus Christ,
you are pieces in the art of resurrection,
and, together, God's light shines
with a radiating brilliance
coloring the emptiness inside and out,
for everyone to enjoy, for no one to possess.

*transforming a forsaken place into a sacred space,
a beautiful gift of surprising grace.*

In the name of Jesus, may we speak and live the art of resurrection.
Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again!
And, together, we say. Amen.

Today, we are going to celebrate communion,
and so **those who will be serving communion to come forward.**

It's been a long time coming,
since we've gathered around tables to remember.

To remember Jesus: Jesus' life, Jesus' death, Jesus' resurrection,
Jesus' body, Jesus' blood, given for us.

But also to re-member:

to bring together the broken body of Christ,
with our bodies,
confessing our broken places before God and each other,
testifying to our need to be fed and nourished by Jesus,
declaring our need for each other.

Today, we gather around these tables of communion
to reflect and to celebrate, our unity in Christ,
to re-member again that, in Jesus,
what seems lost and forgotten will rise again.

For, on the night that he was betrayed,
Jesus took the bread,
and after giving thanks, he broke it,
saying, "This is my body broken for you,
do this in remembrance of me."

And, in the same way, also after supper,
Jesus took the cup,
and said, "This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood,
do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

For as often as you eat this bread and drink of the cup,
you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again.

I invite you to pray with me:

*We thank you, God, that you have remembered us in Jesus.
As we eat the bread and drink from the cup, may we do it in memory of you,
you who welcomed us when we were strangers,
you who reconciled us when we were enemies,
you who freed us when we were held captive,
and you who sends us to bring healing and hope to the world,
the art of resurrection.*

We will celebrate communion today in small groups.
One table in front, and two just outside the doors in back.

If you have a food allergy that is listed in the bulletin, please go to the one of the two tables just outside the doors.

Children (raise your hands):

you are welcome to come to these tables, too.

Jesus invites you to him,

and, as a sign of that, there are crackers and grapes at these tables just for you.

For those of you who have trouble walking or, for whatever reason,

would like the bread and the cup to be brought to you,

please raise your hand when your row is dismissed

and someone who will come to you with the bread and the cup.

During this time, the music team... vt 461 come to the table of grace ,

by feel free to join as you come... as you are seated

When the ushers dismiss your row,

I invite you to come forward and to gather around one of the tables,

in groups of 10-12.

And all those who place their trust in Jesus,

who confess Jesus as Lord and Savior

are invited to share in the bread and the cup.

It's now time to come,

“Come to the table,

not because you must,

but because you may;

come not to testify that you are righteous,

but that you sincerely love the Lord Jesus Christ

and desire to be his true disciple;

come not because you are strong but because you are weak;

not because you have any claim on the grace of Christ

but, because of your frailty and sin,

you stand in constant need of his mercy and help;

come not to express an opinion,

but to seek Jesus’ presence and to pray for his Spirit.”

Come to the table,

for the living Lord Jesus is our host.

