

“Practicing Resurrection”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

based on the theme, “LIVING THE QUESTIONS”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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1 Corinthians 15:50-58 [NRSV]

⁵⁰I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— ⁵²in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. ⁵⁴When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory”

⁵⁵ “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

⁵⁶The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

The first Sunday in Lent is the beginning of a journey toward Easter. It is a journey that takes more than 40 days. At the end of the journey we look to see the goal – resurrection! But what does it mean to talk about resurrection now? We all hope we are more than forty days from our death. We all hope that resurrection is something we can look back on and forward to, but no one is signing up to experience it now, I don't think!

I want to challenge your thinking this morning when it comes to the resurrection. I not only want you to experience resurrection now, I want you to practice it daily, and I do not have a death wish for you. Let me explain to you what I mean.

The first way I want to challenge your thinking about resurrection is by getting you to think about resurrection as more than “pie-in-the-sky-in-the-sweet-bye-and-bye.” That kind of thinking reserves resurrection for the end of life. It is the reward God hands out to good people for being good enough. It is the dream of reuniting with my family and loved ones, of having an eternity of what Merle Haggard sang about:

*Eatin' rainbow stew in a silver spoon,
Underneath that sky of blue.
All be drinkin' free bubble-up,
An' eatin' that rainbow stew.*

Why do I want you to start thinking about it as more than that? Because the powers that be want to use that image, want to hold that promise out

before us, as a way to keep us content with the status quo, so that we will be satisfied with what is now in order to get something better later.

But if this bad economy has done anything, perhaps it has gotten us to realize that “things aren’t the way they should be.” The reality is that good economy or bad things are not as God intends them to be. And too often religion has used the image of the resurrection to keep us content with our discontent in this life by promising us contentment in the afterlife. “Just hold on, don’t make waves, be a good boy or girl, and in the time to come you will get your reward.”

In order for us to think about resurrection differently we have to confront the reality of death. Walter Breuggemann, theology professor and writer, reminds us that Christ got to the resurrection by way of the crucifixion. But the culture we live in tries to deny death and convince us that we can numb ourselves to its reality by the things we purchase. Our culture is the ultimate in “eat-drink-and-be-merry because tomorrow we die,” philosophy. It is the lie that this is the way to self-fulfillment and satisfaction. In this way, the bad economy may help us to reorder our thinking a bit. Suffering and death are real whether we think we are well-off or not. Breuggemann says that the crucifixion of Jesus is God’s way of critiquing the culture of consumerism. God doesn’t just defeat suffering and death, God enters into suffering and death, “takes that death into his own

person.... God himself embraces the death that his people must die.”

[Breuggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*]. He says this is how God cuts through our numbness and invites us to consider then what resurrection really is.

The second way I want to challenge you to think differently about resurrection then is, I want to suggest to you that all that resurrection stands for is something that we can practice now as easily as in the hereafter, wherever that may be. Let me try to lift up three dimensions so you can think about them perhaps in a new way.

Even more than just “new life” or “everlasting life” resurrection is about a quality of life. I think we all can agree our vision of heaven, or the “afterlife,” or the resurrection, if we have one, is ultimately about a quality of life. Now I have to confess that it is easy for me to think of that as a time when I will see my mother and father and brother again. I would love to see some of the wonderful saints I have buried and to be in the presence of God in some more authentic way. I will even confess that my fantasies about heaven don’t involve clouds, long robes, or harps, although angels of a certain type might enter in! But I would love to think of heaven as a nice vacation on a beach in a warm, sunny place with a cold drink in my hand. Now, the theologian in me knows there is more to the picture than that, so let me do my job as theologian-in-residence and disrupt your picture of heaven if it is at all like mine.

I want to suggest to you that the Biblical and theological understandings

of resurrection tell us that resurrection is about at least three things: restoring relationships, overcoming injustice and suffering, and an intimacy with God and others beyond any we have ever known. Even my little personal fantasies about heaven capture some of that don't they? Yet, how much more is the resurrection, as the Bible reveals it to be, about these things in a deeper, more significant way.

First, resurrection is about relationships restored. Yes, it is easy to imagine the great reunion with those we love. But Jesus Christ reveals that we can reach out to build relationships with others as a sign of practicing the resurrection. John Campbell-Nelson – Global Ministries' missionary in Indonesia – witnessed the power of relationship. Rita was born to a mother who already had too many children, too much work and not enough to eat. She died when Rita was just a few weeks old. Her father – a farm laborer – was unable to buy milk for her because he would only have money at harvest time in April. So he fed her what he could – rice water and sugared tea. Rita starved to death. Unfortunately, this isn't unusual event in the hills of Timor. The saddest part is that the milk she needed was sitting on a shelf in Nelson's pantry. The car that could have taken her or her mother to the hospital was parked in the garage. But, Rita's father didn't know the Campbell-Nelsons and they didn't know Rita's father. Besides, this neighbor would be ashamed to ask “the Big White People” for help because he did not feel socially important enough. Campbell- Nelson has trained deacons in Timor to be guardians of their

congregation members' welfare – to make sure no one is forgotten or left out. Now he knows what is missing from that training. Of first importance, he says, is being the kind of community where no one is nobody because anonymity can be a death sentence and hierarchy can kill. This is the kind of community Jesus worked to create – one that we have yet to build. Easter is coming, he says, and with it the promise that God can always bring new life, even from death, but we can practice the resurrection now as we strive to overcome the anonymity that the culture urges upon us.

So tied right in with relationships restored is the second dimension of resurrection. The resurrection is a sign that God will overcome injustice even the injustice of an innocent man suffering and being executed. So we are called to practice the resurrection now by working for justice. Justice isn't just throwing the person whose addiction drives him to crime into jail and forgetting about his humanity. It is about trying to get treatment for that person so that they don't end up being a life-long criminal. This isn't lily-livered bleeding heart liberalism. This is steely-eyed conservatism at its best. It not only conserves a life, it saves money, because it is cheaper to spend the money to rehabilitate that person than it is to continually rearrest and pay to incarcerate that person. That is why at the ICARE Nehemiah Assembly we will push for the city to spend 1.2 million dollars to expand the Matrix house. It will not only save lives from suffering and maybe death, but it will save us 2-3

million dollars in costs per year. That's practicing resurrection at its best!

The third way we can practice resurrection now, rather than waiting for the end of life, is to enter into a deeper intimacy with God. I want to challenge you to think about that in a new way. In a world where many of you here are longing for a hug because you go days and even weeks when no one hugs you we need to practice resurrection now. In a world where sex on the internet is a multi-billion dollar industry that fakes intimacy instead of creating it, we need to practice resurrection now. In a world where people believe God's love is reserved for the deserving rather than for all, we need resurrection now. We need a deeper intimacy with God. In a world where the economy has us struggling with the issue of life, how to sustain it, what gives it meaning, how we will even keep living at all, we need a God who has the power to make resurrection real now, not just at the end of life. That's how I want to challenge your thinking about resurrection.

The third way I want to challenge our thinking about resurrection involves looking around us now. At its heart, resurrection is about answering the question of whether there is any hope for life now. When you are at the end of your rope with a family member you want to know if there is any hope now. When you are beside a friend who is suffering from discrimination because of his race or religion or some other fact in his life you want to know if there is any hope now. When you are standing at the edge of an emotional or financial cliff

you want to know if there is any hope now. Resurrection proclaims that God's power is at work changing death into life. Resurrection proclaims that our hope is not dependent upon our own power but upon a God who has already demonstrated his power. Resurrection proclaims the presence of a God who restores relationships, ends the suffering and death, overcomes injustice, and invites us into an intimacy unlike any other we have ever known.

Paul says that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable put on the imperishable.... We will all be changed." What is dead must put on life, what is mortal must become something different. Things cannot stay as they are and resurrection happen. God has already set in motion the resurrection power to accomplish these things, and we can trust God's power to bring resurrection.

In the meantime, Paul says,

Therefore, my dear brothers [and sisters], stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

In other words keep practicing resurrection. Keep restoring relationships, keep working to overcome injustice, keep striving for deeper intimacy with God and others. God is at work practicing resurrection in us, among us, and through us as we do so. Because of that, we know our labor in the Lord is not in vain. AMEN.