

Scripture Readings

Isaiah 25:6-9 and John 20:1-18

Isaiah 25:6-9

25:6 On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

25:7 And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.

25:8 Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.

25:9 It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

John 20:1-18

20:1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.

20:2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

20:3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb.

20:4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

20:5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.

20:6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there,

20:7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.

20:8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed;

20:9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

20:10 Then the disciples returned to their homes.

20:11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb;

20:12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

20:13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

20:14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

20:15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

20:16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).

20:17 Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

20:18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Easter Sermon

We have asked for a couple weeks now, why was Jesus crucified? We have tried to give an answer, a different one than maybe we are accustomed to hearing. We have tried to say that Jesus had such love, was so alive and so human, so aware that he was beloved by God his Father, that, though he didn't wish to die, his death at the hands of the powerful became inevitable.

Because in our world you cannot love the way Jesus loved; you cannot believe in and love *all* people, and you certainly cannot love them as if they were your own brother or sister, that is much too threatening to those who hold a power based on divisions and exploitation. The system that prevails, the way our world is organized, what has been arranged, is antithetical to the reckless, boundless love that Jesus stuck to even to his death.

And since God is love, and only love, God couldn't save Jesus, anymore than any loving parent can save their child. Our love allows children to grow and develop and become who they are meant to be, but it does not protect them from disappointments or sadness, nor can it

spare them from the pain of encountering the unloving society that is all around them.

So, why was Jesus crucified? For being radically human, for rejecting limits and divisions on love, for favoring the victims and the sinners of society, for these reasons he was crucified; he had to be.

Crucifixion, as theologian Herbert McCabe explains, “was essentially death by public helplessness. If you rebelled against the power of Rome or if as a slave you rebelled against the rich, your masters, you were tied or nailed to a stake and left for everyone to see you dying of pain and cramps and exhaustion. Some people took days, writhing powerlessly in continual pain as a living and dying symbol of the power and domination of the rulers.” With the crucifixion, the rulers of this world intended to send a message: do not love like *this* man did. Don’t make *his* mistake.

And this message, this crucifixion, has worked. We do not take the risks of love that Jesus took. We have love but we don’t just let it *be*. We don’t extend it to just anyone. There is always a limit that we ourselves

place on our own love. There is always a caution, a withholding. We have learned to settle. As McCabe writes, though we were made in the image of the God who is love, we settle for living in our own, lesser self-image. We will love some people but not all people. We will love but only to a point. We will walk a fine line and be sensible, we will use common sense. We will not dare to live like Jesus. We have seen the cross and we have received it as the warning the Romans meant it to be.

All week long we have tried to stay and to linger in these long, dark shadows of the cross. Maybe to repent for our part in this, for settling for the kind of society we have settled for. Or maybe, like Christ, some of us are also victims of this society; then we are always in the shadows. And so we go to the cross not to repent but to pay our respects to a fellow-sufferer, who, in *that* sense, can be said to have died *for us*, meaning, died because of his identification *with us*, because he became as we are, the wretched of the earth, who the respectable and powerful prefer not to see, who wave us away with magical graphs and charts that say our poverty and our pain is a normal part of a rational economy. That

our having to struggle for everything, to live with constant distress, is just the way the world works and it can never be any other way.

Then comes the shock. At our vigil, after Saturday's day of rest, in the early hours of a new day and a new week, Jesus is not where we expect to find him. Mary Magdalene finds the tomb empty; instead of joy she at first experiences further grief. Someone has moved Jesus' body from its resting place, a final insult, a final humiliation. Have they spit on his grave now just as they had spit in his face? The bullies of this world have no shame.

But then, as Mary weeps from this, Jesus appears to her. And then he speaks to her. He wipes away her tears by saying her name. His body had not been stolen or hidden, the Roman rulers can not do anything to his body now. He has been raised from the dead, he has conquered death itself. And Mary has seen him. He has been present to her, he has loved her and helped her to put away her tears. And the disciples too have believed, Peter and the one whom Jesus loved. A new day has come, and

with it a new life *within* their belief; a new existence, a new horizon free from death forever.

Mary Magdalene and the disciples *are* able now to love like Jesus. Because they believe in him. Though he was crucified by Rome to send a message about his powerlessness, instead, through their belief and their faith, Jesus' apparent weakness becomes even stronger than Rome itself. Paul writes about this over and over, that Jesus' weakness, God's weakness, is stronger than man's strength, that what looks like weakness in this world is really the power of love in this world—and love alone can overturn death, love alone can subvert the public message Rome intended, turning it on its head. Though the rulers of the world have violence and cruelty and torture at their disposal, they do not have God; instead God is with *us*, the sufferers, the mourners, the meek, the poor. God is with us the lovers, and so long as we do believe in the resurrection, we also may live, truly live, freed from the fear of death, the very fear which Roman (and all imperial) power is built on.

I know the resurrection is a stumbling block for many of us. We can't believe in it quite so easily as Mary and the disciples. But we will need to if we plan on rearranging our society. Because Rome does *not* believe. They do *not* believe Jesus is risen. They believe violence works! They plan to use it again, they have used it again, they will over and over, since they mistakenly believe it works. We must believe it doesn't. That is the only way to overcome the powers of this world, with belief in a power that is not of this world. We need to believe in the resurrection if we plan on living truly human lives in the image of the God who is love, and not being doomed to settle and suffer for so much less.

We will need to take up the resurrection in just the way that Jesus dares to take up the cross. Our cross to bear, I'm afraid, *is* faith, is belief, that though we cannot prove it, though we cannot put a timeframe to it, what Isaiah has foretold will inevitably come. On this very earth, we must believe, the God who is love will in the course of things make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines. We must believe in the course of things that God will destroy on this earth this shroud that is cast over all the peoples and that which is spread like a

sheet over all nations including our own. On this earth, as in heaven, we must believe that God will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away. And we will live in sheer delight in the life of love between us.

It may be hard to understand this. But it is not hard to see the only way to it is through faith. Mysteries like the cross and resurrection are not true in the way we'd like them to be, in the risk-averse way we are comfortable with. They are true in a different, more profound way than just as a fact of history or a chain of reaction in unseen particles. The cross and the resurrection don't have anything to do with the laws of physics. They are rather what the God who is love has, by her initiative, asked us to have faith in.

Even if we can't take up the resurrection as our cross to bear, even if we cannot really have faith, we should *pretend*. Because the life of the oppressed, the wellbeing and dignity of the poor, the unnecessary suffering of so many people in this country and in this world depends on

the faith of resurrection, faith that a new bodily life will yet be snatched from death. Pretend if you have to, because we are crucifying people every day, and they deserve your faith. They deserve at least that. And they deserve your support. They deserve a resurrection of their own.

And in the end, we all do. Because this world we have arranged is not the one we were meant for. Christ is risen. Christ is risen, indeed!
The Lord GOD has spoken.

Alleluia and amen.