



First United Church of Oak Park

What Does the Resurrection Mean?

Isaiah 55:1-11, 12:2-6

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There are some scriptures that are carried around in the heart. Words of promise and cries of grief and wise counsel that are so filled to the brim with truth and light that they live inside the human heart. And in moments when the truth and the needfulness of those words are most heightened, then they appear. In my experience, anyway, that's how it is. So I wonder. I wonder on that Easter morning, after Jesus was buried, after the Sabbath had come and gone, after the women had gathered the burial spices and began their walk to the tomb. On that walk when it seemed that death had proven victorious, I wonder what Scriptures came blossoming into their minds. I wonder if those words weren't

"I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind." As the women who would be the first to witness the resurrection spoke to one another, not knowing how they would roll away the stone, I wonder if words of Scripture came to them:

"Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear."

Because there at the tomb, the very angels of heaven met the women—and behold, a mystery. Why look for the living among the dead, he is not here, he is risen! And those old words, they echo today, true and good and life giving. And those old words, they are needed today, because make no mistake, the powers of death are real. The powers of empire that viewed Jesus as a threat, the powers of piety that were aligned with the status quo viewed Jesus as a threat. The powers of death were real, and are real.

But they have been swallowed up in victory. Life has won and shall be triumphant. These are the promises of God—they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain—the promises of God are not wind to go out and never return. God has promised.

Human hearts renewed, life coming from out of death.

I have testimony today, I have two stories to tell you of the Gospel on the march in the world. As you may be aware the church has received a little bit of attention in the past 12 days. Five weeks into our Lenten practice of fasting from whiteness—during which church has been great. It

has been great. Five weeks in, our little banner, which was maybe 3 feet by 10 feet, our little banner loomed so large you could read about it in New York and California. You could read about it in Canada, you could read about it in the UK.

The work of racial justice—which we were pursuing in worshipful ways—became occasion for our being publicly pilloried and subjected to a campaign of harassment and threats. Our Palm Sunday service last week, I moved it to an online only format. Because someone who lives in the Chicagoland area made a direct and specific threat against our Palm Sunday service. I know it was disappointing; I was disappointed. But I want to give testimony today, that person who made that threat has acknowledged what they did to the police, acknowledged that it was wrong, and sent this church an apology, along with an Easter lily from Westgate Flowers. And that flower is in the very center of our table today. To turn, to put one foot down on the paths to peace and begin the journey—this is life and light and good news. Human hearts renewed, life coming out from the shroud of death.

The second story has to do with the reality of the work that we have been doing in this season of Lent—the anti-racist work that this national and international attention highlights the needfulness of. The work of anti-racism is critical. I want to read you something, it's a sermon by another preacher, entitled, Racial Justice: The Idea Whose Time Has Come. And I quote:

“Millions of Americans, more than one in ten of our population, are struggling for their basic human rights. They struggle not for the securing of special privileges, nor the pursuit of extraordinary claims, but solely to obtain those fundamental rights which others take for granted.

”Much of the tragedy of the present hour is upon our heads, much of the pain of it can be traced to our sluggishness of spirit, our indifference, our cheap discipleship, our fear of controversy, our easy compromises with injustice.

”Ultimately I am hopeful about the outcome; but don't ever underestimate the potential explosiveness of the situation. Even those of us who, through the protective wrappings of suburbia, are better able than many others to keep ugly situations at a safe distance are closer to the heart of the struggle than we suspect.” End quote.

These words were preached from this very pulpit, on August 11th 1963, three weeks before the march on Washington. They were preached by Dr. Oliver Powell, then senior minister, now among the great cloud of witnesses. But how did I come to have these words at my fingertips? Loey Powell, his daughter, had been looking through some of her dad's things

this week and—upon hearing of the struggles our church was engaged in—sent it to me in the hopes it might be enlightening. Words preached almost sixty years ago hang in the air again today. Words first inspired by the Holy Spirit and steeped in the Scriptures have been sent by the work of the Holy Spirit to be heard again in this sanctuary.

And these words convict me today as deeply as if I had been sitting in the pews hearing Dr. Powell thunder them that day.

These words convict me for two reasons. First, these words convict me because they could have been written today—which breaks my heart. We should be farther. I wish that there were more that marked this sermon as more of an anachronism. The work of racial justice is not done, it is not done, it is not done. The words echo and sound as fresh as those from the prophet Isaiah do: No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. The words of Isaiah could be written about Tamir Rice, or Laquan McDonald, or Ahmoud Arbery, or Sandra Bland, or Emmitt Till. The right to be safe, on the streets, in a playground, in your own bed at night: these are not special rights, but ones that ought to be granted.

The words of Isaiah are timely today--they shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. These words could be written about redlining, or voting laws built to disenfranchise, or food deserts, or predatory lending. The right to thrive from work, to get ahead and work so that the next generation is more secure than the last, these are not extraordinary claims. They are the good dream of any parent and ought to be granted.

We should be farther. And Dr. Powell's words come back to me: much of the tragedy of the present hour is upon our heads, much of the pain of it can be traced to our sluggishness of spirit, our indifference, our cheap discipleship, our fear of controversy, our easy compromises with injustice. These words convict me first because they could have been written today.

And. And. AND. These words convict me because I can draw courage from our forebears and our elders, members of this church who were at the work of racial justice twenty years before I was even born—the fair housing ordinance and the multicultural center and a diverse village. This work is not new. In this work we stand among a great cloud of witnesses—Dr. Powell and Dr. King, John Brown and John Lewis. Other Christians have been courageous; that helps me find my courage too.

There are some Scriptures that are carried around in the heart. Words of promise and cries of grief and wise counsel that are so filled to the brim with truth and light that they live inside the human heart. And in moments when the truth and the needfulness of those words are most heightened, then they appear. In my experience, anyway, that's how it is. So I wonder.

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent--its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.

These are the promises of God—they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain—the promises of God are not wind to go out and never return. God has promised.

So we may live with courage, for the ending has been written by the hand of the one who has painted the heaven's skies, and plumbed the depths of hell and made of it an emptiness. God's is the victory, ours is to be faithful and to live like we know it's true. May God help us.