

Sermon: God's Social Distancing

Scripture: Luke 24:13-35

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

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We are within the season of Easter, the aura of the resurrection and for over 2000 years now we've been within the gravitational field of the resurrection. But let's not stop there cause in so far as the resurrection was eternity breaking through into time, the space of heaven breaking through into creation, the resurrection becomes the interpretive principle for understanding all of existence from the beginning, actually, before the beginning to end and beyond the ending. So every Sunday no matter when it occurs is a little Easter celebration for us and the other 6 days of the week are actually 6 days because of the resurrection of Jesus on the 7th day. That's the hold this moment, this event, we call the resurrection has over this little globe and its history. For those of us in the West so much is seen through the lense of the resurrection, whether we know it or not, whether we are Christian or not, it's in the air transmitting grace, love and healing.

And what we hear in the scripture for this morning is the earliest accounts of how the Reality of the Resurrection, the Gift of God's Grace known through Christ's resurrection begins to dawn on people in space and time, though it's not limited to that space and time. And I guess I'm not done with the theme that I lifted up at Easter cause it's so prominent in today's account as it is in all the resurrection stories and that is the nothing-to-hold-onto quality of the Resurrection, that whatever effect the resurrection had on the people who

encountered Jesus after his death and whatever mystery the Resurrection contains for us in our lives there is an invisible, hidden, distanced dimension to it.

The Gospels seem to go out of their way to be clear about two things in recounting the Resurrection – that while one might think of Jesus appearing after death as a revenant, a ghost, a phantom, they make clear that he's quite physical in his presence just a physicality of a different order and the second thing is that everywhere you turn that physicality cannot be held onto, cannot be caught, claimed, clutched, or captured!

Now why in the world would that be?

Why would Mary who was so deeply grieving the death of Jesus, when he appears to her and she realizes that he's not in fact dead but quite alive and she goes to grab ahold of him, why would she not be able or allowed to do that? And then the disciples on the road to Emmaus, they are walking along traumatized and grieving Jesus' crucifixion and confused with the rumors of an empty tomb, and they are on the road when Jesus, who they do not recognize, walks up beside them and hearing what they are talking about explains the Jewish scriptures to them making sense of his place in them and then sits down to eat with them and just as their eyes are opened to His presence and reality, he disappears from them, vanishes full stop.

And as they are telling the other disciples the story of their encounter, Jesus again appears among them and retreats again telling them to stay together and wait... I mean, what a tease, this resurrected Jesus is! He finally appears one more time on the hill outside of Jerusalem and what happens? We read: "He lifted up his hands and blessed them and left them." No more resurrection appearances after that moment. But we say His Spirit then comes...

And so I reiterate what I said at the end of my Easter sermon – that we’re left with nothing to hold onto. Nothing but the promise of God’s love. But this makes sense cause if we claim that one of, if not THE fundamental attribute of God is LOVE then what happens in the resurrection narratives and what we experience in our own lives of the hidden ungraspable nature of God only makes sense, cause that is the nature of love. Yes, love requires closeness but maybe more importantly especially in the case of unequal power dynamics, love requires distancing too. It’s gotta be both-and, a fluid reality of moving toward and moving away, of moving in to touch and of letting go. And it’s the letting go that we struggle with, that feels like not-loving but is love.

The Australian theologian Christopher Ochs wrote about this as the self-distancing nature of God. He refers to a Jewish Kabbalah principle of creation from 16th century writings known as “zimzum” – which describes the beginning of all things as an act of self-contraction or self-concentration of God into Godself before commencing the act of creation. “God reduces Godself away from a point so that something that is not God can have space and time to exist.” As the Jewish philosopher Gerschom Scholem explains – “the first act of En-Sof, the Infinite Being, is therefore not a step outside but a step inside, a movement of recoil, a falling back upon oneself, of withdrawing oneself... the first act of God, therefore, is not one of revelation but of limitation.”

And on this Mother’s Day Sunday, it’s worth thinking about how love requires this, as revealed by our mothers. Let me quote at length from Christopher Ochs explanation that what compels God to contract Godself is love:

This idea might seem initially abstract, but it is more than familiar. When a couple decides to have children, they reduce their own freedom and yet at the same time make more

space in various ways to allow something new to be created. The mother, in fact, makes space in herself for this new being to exist, and she experiences emotional loss, a kind of distancing, after birth. Parents give up their time, space, money, nerves, sleep, peace, quiet, and a lot of other comforts. They bind the rest of their lives to this new being from which they increasingly have to distance themselves. It is strange and irrational – it is love. For love is able to increase by decreasing, to become more and not less when something is abundantly given, including and at times most especially, when distance is given. P.356

He goes on to talk about how God had to give us space in order for love to be real and not compelled which would be something other than love. He continues:

We would be robbed of any choice if we received God's presence unmediated. God does not force Godself on humanity. So a key element of love is not imposing oneself on the other, not assuming that the other needs or wants (or should need or want) me. Love waits until it is called for. Love hides, gives space, gives distance to let the other be. Distance makes love possible – and at times love demands distance. This then is felt in a seeming absence of God in personal experience, but also in history.

Some of us have mothers that did that pretty well, held onto us just long enough and then out of love let us go. Some of us have mothers who did it terribly, were far too distant for us to know of their love and care or were far too smothering for us to become who we were meant to be outside of her. None of our mothers did it perfectly and none of you mothers are doing it perfectly with your children, for it is a delicate dance and movement and what painful ambiguities there are in a mothers' effort to love while allowing for distance and

letting go. Have I done it enough? Have I done it too much? Our human love is not perfect... or maybe the love is perfect but filtered through our minds and psyches, our fears and egos it gets mucked up at times, inevitably, for all of us.

God as our Great Mother understands, I would think. She gets our tantrums and gripping and fussing all the time – where are you God, don't you love me, how can you allow this, if you really loved me...!!? God's distancing allows room for such questions and resentments, even allows room for our violence and utter rejection of God and love (represented most graphically as Jesus on the cross) but God's distancing, God's drawing back of Godself, God's suffering on a cross, God's empty tomb and not allowing us anything to hold too tightly too, allows room for our freedom which is realized in our freedom to come to love ourselves.

Since we lost the choir this morning I thought I would end my sermon with a song about leaving and letting go which is appropriate at this time of year when there are graduations and transitions and departures all around us:

Go with strength with all that's in you
Go with strength no need to fear
Though alone we all go with you,
You need to know you're strong my dear.

Go with hope you're young and open
Go with hope it'll serve you well.
The past is past but coming to you
Are days that glitter, rise and swell.

Go with heart for there's your strong suite
Go with heart over head
Mind the hooks and mind the chatter
Mind the mind go with heart instead.

Go with peace to find your calling
Go with peace to where you belong
Trust the hand that brought you this far
Will hold you sure as you carry on.

Go with grace let grace attend you
Go with grace and sing her tune
Gifts abound abound on far horizons
Go with grace and come back soon.

It is in the setting out, the leaving and the letting go that we find our way,
discover our path, and fall into the arms of Love... in Jesus' name, amen.

*Ochs, Christopher, *God's Self-Distancing: What a Global Pandemic Might Teach Us About God*, in *Theology*, Vol. 123(5) 353-360, 2020, Melbourne School of Theology