

Sermon: The Heart of Easter

Scripture: John 20:1-18

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

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We began our walk with Jesus through Lent this year way back on February 14th when we Christians of the West gathered to receive ashes on our forehead on Ash Wednesday and were reminded that from dust we have come and to dust we shall return. You might remember that Ash Wednesday fell on Valentine's Day this year in an odd convergence of ashes and hearts, but it really was appropriate for the journey from Ash Wednesday to some 40 days later finding ourselves walking to the foot of the cross of Good Friday and here to Easter morning, because that walk with Jesus is a journey of the heart which means not so much hallmark cards, sweet-tarts, chocolate, and roses, but a journey deeper and more harrowing than that. Love in this world involves ashes and dust, dragging feet and broken hearts as much as sunny spring days of whistling, skipping down the lane and holding hands.

The poet Jan Richardson, in only the way she can, reminds us of this when she posted on Ash Wednesday/Valentine's Day this poem which she entitled "Blessing for the Brokenhearted" from her book "The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief". She writes:

Let us agree
for now
that we will not say
the breaking
makes us stronger
or that it is better
to have this pain
than to have done
without this love.

Let us promise
we will not
tell ourselves
time will heal
the wound,
when every day
our waking
opens it anew.

Perhaps for now
it can be enough
to simply marvel
at the mystery
of how a heart
so broken
can go on beating,
as if it were made
for precisely this—

as if it knows
the only cure for love
is more of it,

as if it sees
the heart's sole remedy
for breaking
is to love still,

as if it trusts
that its own
persistent pulse
is the rhythm
of a blessing
we cannot
begin to fathom
but will save us
nonetheless.¹

The heart of Easter is the still beating heart of Jesus that after all that is done to Him, all the rejection from his religious leaders, the fickle adoration and condemnation madness of the crowds, the denial and betrayal of his friends and

¹ Richardson, Jan "Blessing for the Brokenhearted" from "The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief", Wanton Gospeller Press, 2020.

finally his execution at the hands of the state, after all of that, not only did his heart start beating again after it had been broken and stopped but it continued to beat with love, demonstrating for all the world and all of history to see that the only cure for love, the sole remedy for its breaking is to love still.

The Heart of Easter is the radical scandalous revelation that within God Godself is the broken and still-beating heart. It's not even now how we are use to thinking of great power much less the greatest power of all and yet this is what Good Friday and Easter require of us, this is the revelation. The writer Ronald Rolheiser explains it in this way – "The power of God in this world is never a power of muscle, speed, brilliance, physical attractiveness or compelling presence all of which leave no choice but to bend your knee is obeisance. The world's power works this way, but God's power is different." The Greek word for power that is associated with God in the New Testament is the word *exousia* and it doesn't have a direct translation in English but Rolheiser suggests that the word refers to something like this:

If you would put the strongest man in the world into a room with a newborn baby and ask which of these two would be more powerful, you might at first glance say that the man is more powerful. But the baby possesses a different kind of power and it's a far deeper one, one that can move things muscle cannot move. A baby has *exousia*, it's vulnerability is a greater power. It doesn't need to outmuscle anyone. A baby invites and beckons, and all that's moral and deep in our conscience cannot walk away. It's no accident that God chose to be incarnated into this world as baby.²

The Heart of Easter reveals God's power as *exousia*, the babe born to Bethlehem who healed the sick, who taught love and care to the least, was in his

² Rolheiser, Ronald. *The Passion and the Cross*, Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 1989. P.36

lifetime already a great enough power to threaten the Roman Empire whose *military* crushed enemies, whose *economy* run rough-shod over laborers and the poor, whose *religion* bowed to violent dominating gods, whose *politics* lifted men up as gods and saviors and it was their power that felt threatened by this poor Galilean healer and teacher from Galilee and right they were to have felt the threat as history would prove.

But as a result this greater exousia, God's power of love in this world, at Easter did not rescue the oppressed Jews from Roman rule at the time, it did not wreak vengeance upon all those wrong-doers, but, as only love can do, as love can do only, there began the slow work of redemption in and through human hearts, the gradual coming together of what was torn asunder.

Judas wanted vengeance meted out to the Romans. Peter wanted to protect Jesus from the Jewish authorities. James and John wanted to sit at the right hand of power. But none of that had anything to do with the work of heaven, the work of Jesus which was... and through his Spirit is today... about redeeming the human heart.

The Heart of Easter is about the healing power of love that is the greatest power in the world. And in so far as we seek to be an Easter People, walking the way of Christ, we must believe in this power, bet our lives on it, that it's the truest and deepest of all things...especially when we are tempted towards responses of violence and domination and retaliation and silencing and devaluing and separation from whomever whenever...especially then we are called back to the heart of Easter and to remembering that the promised future at the heart of Easter is a world reborn and made new and ok in the end.

One more image to leave you with. A Sociologist of Religion named Peter Berger lays out this scene to help us understand what Jesus offers in his loving sacrifice and through his risen Spirit:

Consider the most ordinary... gesture by which a mother reassures her anxious child. A child wakes up at night, perhaps from a bad dream and finds himself surrounded by darkness, alone, beset by nameless threats. At such a moment the contours of trusted reality are blurred and invisible, in the terror of incipient chaos the child cries out for his mother. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that at this moment the mother is being invoked as a high priestess of protective order. It is she (and in many cases she alone) who has the power to banish the chaos and to restore the benign shape of the world. And of course any good mother will do just that. She will take the child and cradle him in the timeless gesture of the Magna Mater who became our Madonna. She will turn on a lamp, perhaps, which will encircle the scene with a warm glow or reassuring light... She will speak or sing to the child and the content of this communication will invariably be the same – “do not be afraid, everything is in order, everything is all right.”³

That’s what Jesus said to his disciples when he returned at the resurrection – do not be afraid. The one held on Mary’s lap in the manger on that holy night becomes the one within whose love all the world is held and redeemed.

So in the jangled nerves of this day, in this era with the threat of chaos all around us with global warming and the plight of refugees from poverty and violence and the wars started by madmen that create such suffering and the politics of threat and grandiosity, let us not be afraid to lead with the heart as Jesus did, remembering and embodying the truth that nothing, not even death itself has power over the power of God’s love, a love which will have the final say.

³ Rolheiser, Ronald. *The Passion and the Cross*, Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 1989. P.105

I hope you feel on this Easter Day and in this Easter season something of the reassuring power and presence of our Mother God, Redeeming Christ and Sustaining Spirit whose love is the source of all that is and the destination of all our journeys, amen.