

## ***So Now What Do We Do?***

**John 20:19-23**

For some reason, a lot of people seem tired this morning. I don't know whether it's the cumulative effect of March Madness and celebrating the UCONN women's championship, or being hung over from watching the 19-inning, 7 1/2 hour Yankee/Red Sox game, or simply the post-Easter blues, but spring fever has struck like a contagion. If I didn't have to be here, I might have slept in for a change or taken Bling and Fusco for a walk or gone with Wendy out for a leisurely breakfast at Carson's (where I'm likely to find a number of other AWOL church members).

Honestly, I understand the difference a week makes. Easter was the big deal; today is like the no big deal. Last Sunday was the sweeps show; this week is the rerun. A week ago we enjoyed a sumptuous feast; today we're stuck with leftovers.

Vacations are meant for days like this. No one will notice. Public schools are on their Spring Break, college students are on the home stretch of their semesters, snowbirds are still unpacking their bags, late filers are feverishly working on their taxes, and lots of folks are in transition or recovering from the stress of life.

This is typically what happens on the Sunday after Easter. The attendance is down, less planning has been done, the choirs are completely sung out! For pastors and staff, all the preparations over the last few months are over and completed; the focus now is on clean-up and recovery; tidy-up our Holy Week messes and get things in order for the normal, run-of-the-mill routine until Children's Day.

In the meantime, it's one of those, "So now what do we do?" kind of Sundays.

This happens to us in a lot of arenas of life. We work hard on a project to bring it to completion, or get through a big family event that has been planned for months, or graduate from a degree program and then scratch your head and say, "Ok, so now what do I do? I've taken care of the important matters, so where do I go from here? What's up next?"

In effect, that's what this Sunday is like. As much as it seems like a time to recover and regroup, it really isn't. There's a purpose behind it. We are to move forward from the Easter celebration—from simply believing in the resurrection to, in the words of Wendell Berry, begin *practicing* resurrection. What we celebrate about the good news of being promised eternal life is now being re-presented as something much more, i.e., that we are to engage eternity while living this life.

What does that mean? As Clarence Jordan phrased it:

God raised Jesus, not as an invitation to us to come to heaven when we die, but as a declaration that He himself has now established permanent residence on earth. The resurrection places Jesus on this side of the grave, here and now, in the midst of this life. He is standing beside us, strengthening us in this life. The Good News of the resurrection is not that we shall die and go home with him but that he is risen and comes home with us, bringing all his hungry, naked, thirsty, sick, prisoner brothers and sisters with him.

*The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb, but the full hearts of his transformed disciples. The crowning evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship. Not a rolled-away stone, but a carried-away church.*

That is precisely the post-Easter message of the Gospel. We are to stop admiring our lilies and go out and plant them; we're not just to

be singing about the Risen Lord, we are called to start living in his Spirit! We're to make the meaning behind resurrection real to our own lives and the lives of those who have missed the point of living; we're to tell our friends and neighbors that Jesus isn't just readying a place for them when they die, but helping them find authentic purpose and meaning in their lives right now! To echo Clarence Jordan's point: if resurrection is God's refusal to remain on the other side of the grave, it's time to show to the world we're living with resurrected minds and hearts!

In many ways, I suppose, we're just like Jesus' disciples who didn't quite know what to do with this idea of resurrection. They could grasp the life he had until his painful, horrific death. They could accept a belief in the ultimate resurrection, when God would open up the graves of the righteous and they would rise from the depths of Sheol. But that was a distant promise, without much expectation for fulfillment until they were long gone. What about now? What do we do now? What they didn't expect was that they would become witnesses to eternity breaking in to *meet them!*

We can put ourselves into the moment. In the first few hours of post-Easter reality, the friends of Jesus were huddled in secret, afraid that everything was coming undone, overwhelming them with the fear that the powers that be had successfully conspired to kill Jesus and were now coming after them. The fantastic tales of the women were heard, but what was that, if not merely the delirium of mourning? What worried them most was the fact of the empty tomb and a concern about grave-robbers. What were these sinister hands going to do to Jesus' corpse? If they came for Jesus, then, for certain,

they would be next. That was the real, fear-stricken state they were in. Death was hanging over them. They were in a near-death crisis. So now what do they do?

According to John, that is when they met eternity face to face—not in their sudden death, but by being overwhelmed by the power of life! As the story in John’s accounts goes, the peace of the Presence of God came to them. We cannot know for certain what they saw, or how they saw it, or what it was like, but we do know, their collective vision of the Risen Lord changed everything. Instead of hiding in paralyzing fear, a peace that surpassed all understanding calmed them.

Then Jesus showed them the wounds that violence inflicts as a final curse and punishment upon life, and they realized it was him—that even death couldn’t quench the God-given life within him. In John’s version of a Pentecostal moment, Jesus breathed his life-giving Spirit into them and gave them life and their marching orders. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

The tide had turned. The momentum had changed. It wasn’t about an escape from death; it was the confidence to take on the world fearlessly knowing that death no longer had power over them. They met eternity in the Risen Lord and life won! Not only that, but the peace of eternity was invading their violent world and the followers of Jesus themselves were becoming the front line!

Except this wouldn’t be yet another field of battle—with Jesus’ angelic army marshalling to retaliate against his enemies. Instead of equipping them with the world’s weapons of mass destruction to settle an eye for an eye and a death for a death, Jesus gave his

followers heaven's authority to do quite the opposite: in effect to do the very things that would interrupt and end the violence, to purge resentment and retaliation, and to reverse malice and hostility. No more crucifixion—no more vengeance. He bestowed upon them the grace of life and the power to forgive!

The ability to forgive sins was the hallmark of those who would follow his lead. This wasn't some milquetoast type of mercy. It was forgiveness with an edge, intended to transform the evils of the world into good (and, presumably, if not receptive, forgiveness to be withheld!). As Holocaust survivor, Hannah Arendt, attests, "Forgiveness is the only way to reverse the irreversible flow of history."

Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to a single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell.<sup>1</sup>

Forgiveness is the most effective means to move beyond grievances and injustice and from the darkness of evil without perpetuating more evil, especially when true justice cannot be achieved.

Forgiveness is the sign of eternity breaking in to bring the light of a new day. It has a profound power to both silence the offender and to heal the broken and suffering heart, as victims gain control.

Of course, the disciples would remember, this was the same power Jesus used to heal broken people—giving each person the chance to begin again. This was the same divine authority Jesus exercised to start righting his world of the corruption and self-serving greed that even religious institutions and leaders were mired in

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt & Peter Baehr, *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, Penguin 2003, pg. 181.

because they abused their roles as the gatekeepers to God. When his enemies believed they had finally silenced him, Jesus had the audacity to rise up and bestow the same power and authority to his disciples: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

For John, forgiveness was the evidence of the resurrected life—of the reconciling Spirit of Christ being present, of the rules of eternity going into effect to alter the course of human history. Forgiveness was, and is, the eternal art of practicing resurrection!

This is what do we do in this post-Easter period. We pick up where Jesus left off and start practicing resurrection! We embrace a mind and heart of resurrection that brings light, instead of more darkness into situations. We put into practice the actions and behaviors that reflect a healed world, not a broken one. We function as agents of mercy, of wellbeing, of reconciliation, of healing, of nurturing, of redemption, and of all the things that restore hope for ultimate good to triumph and rise up in life!

As we do this, we come to discover we can move beyond limitations that the fear of death imposes upon us. Forgiveness helps us quiet the violence within ourselves. As a result, we don't fear strangers as much, or enemies, or bullies, or tyrants, or terrorists, or those who live in death's shadow as slaves to fear. We don't have to, for our lives are embraced and empowered by eternal life and inspired by God's own Spirit and invested in a destiny that is entirely different than death! We live embracing life in its fullness. That's practicing resurrection! That is what we do after celebrating Easter!

So with these marching orders on this post-Easter Sunday, let me conclude with a little more of Wendell Berry's manifesto on practicing resurrection.

So, friends, every day do something  
that won't compute. Love the Lord.  
Love the world. Work for nothing.  
Take all that you have and be poor.  
Love someone who does not deserve it...

Go with your love to the fields.  
Lie down in the shade. Rest your head  
in her lap. Swear allegiance  
to what is nighest your thoughts.  
As soon as the generals and the politicians  
can predict the motions of your mind,  
lose it. Leave it as a sign  
to mark the false trail, the way  
you didn't go. Be like the fox  
who makes more tracks than necessary,  
some in the wrong direction.  
Practice resurrection.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Excerpts from, Wendell Berry, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front," 1991.