

On the Resurrection of Jesus. The Day of Resurrection 2013. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

A colleague of mine - a UCC pastor in Seattle - told me a story last week. A parishioner had come to her a year after she'd preached a sermon about Dietrich Bonhoeffer. For those of you who are unfamiliar with Bonhoeffer, he was a German, and a Lutheran pastor and theologian who was, in the early 1930s, a prominent leader among those opposed to the evils of Nazism that had taken over their nation. He helped establish what became known as the Confessing Church, which stood in opposition to the official Protestant churches that had literally been taken over by the Nazis. Until his arrest in 1943 he worked tirelessly to support the Confessing Church, help Jews escape from Germany, and oppose the Nazis. He had many opportunities to remain in safe countries overseas but always returned because, he believed, this was his calling. During this period he wrote what is one of the most famous Christian books of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, "The Cost of Discipleship", in which (among other things) he argued against "cheap grace." There is, he said, a cost to living with integrity and faithfulness, words that held a very real and present meaning for him, standing, as he did, in the Gestapo's long shadow. He was arrested in 1943 he was eventually sent to Buchenwald and then Flossenberg concentration camps. In early April of 1945, just days before the camp was liberated, he was taken away by the Gestapo. His last words were: "This is the end, but for me the beginning of life". Two days later he was taken outside, stripped, and hung. An eye-witness talked of how he knelt in prayer and then "climbed the few steps to the gallows, brave and composed." "Never", this eye-witness - a doctor - observed, "have.....I seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God."

And the parishioner who came to my friend? He couldn't get past the sense that Bonhoeffer threw his life away. "He could have stayed in London, in New York, in Stockholm, worked from there...and lived," he said. And, he added, after some thought, "what a waste of a life!" Of course, he was wondering - to flip the question over - this: was there meaning in Bonhoeffer's death?

There is, for me, an eerie parallel with some of Jesus' decisions and actions throughout his life and especially in this last week of his life. He, too, opposed an empire. He, too, could have stayed safe in the Galilee, or returned there before the Passover, avoiding the final confrontation with the Empire that murdered him. Perhaps the same words apply? "What a waste of a life"? Was there meaning in Jesus' death?

We are here today because for 20 centuries we Christians have made perhaps the most troubling and difficult affirmation in our faith absolutely central to our faith, summed up by three words: "He is risen"!

And for 20 centuries others - starting with the very core of Jesus' followers - the men, anyway - have wondered about the veracity of the claim, thinking it, according to the Gospel of Luke, "an idle tale". That's an interesting phrase - in a Lexicon (a New Testament Greek to English dictionary) the alternatives are "absurd", "rubbish", or "humbug". "Not believable" would be a neutral way to describe the disciples' response.

The story we celebrate today is not one that historians - even Christian historians - can

authenticate. This is a different sort of truth, a truth that – for 20 centuries – has made Christians act “in the most heroic, joyful, beautiful [and, yes, sometimes] terrible ways”. (Diarmaid MacCulloch, 94).

There is real irony to the truth that at the heart of our faith there is a blank space – the empty tomb. But what, down the centuries, has seemed “an idle tale” to some, and absurd to others – talk of an empty tomb and a human raised from death – has, for many of those people, also been the very thing that has convinced them to commit themselves to this disturbing claim, a commitment that opened the door to new life and for acts of love and reconciliation in the world.

“Convinced them, how?” you might ask.

And they would answer “convinced by moments of encounter”.

Convinced by what I can only call “the en-Spirited presence of Jesus”, an infused presence, a reality we recognize as profound and real, a presence within each of us and within others that has been transformational beyond Jesus’ time, and space, and life.

This “en-Spirited presence of Jesus” is the life that nurtures us, that helps us as we face the may small and large crucifixions of our own lives, that stands beside us as we celebrate our joys and embraces us as we mourn our losses. It is the “en-Spirited presence of Jesus” that offers us meaning in world so ready to rip it from our arms and tear if from our hearts.

This story of an empty tomb, and of resurrection is – among many things – a metaphor for the transformation of our lives such that we live as models of integrity and faith, witnessing to the power of faith-filled community to make a difference for good in the lives of every human being.

So what do we mean by “resurrection” today? What do I mean? When I talk of resurrection I’m talking of a life lived in service of others, a life lived that confronts and opposes evil, a life lived that expands into those places of pain and need offering hope; a life lived beyond ourselves.

We are products of a blended tradition, and in this story we hear the echoes of part of the other tradition, from another proclamation, from Isaiah, channeling God: “behold I am doing a new thing; can you not see it?” At our best, we who are the Church seek to continue as the community of the new creation – the Jesus Community – in a world that is too often headed for dissolution by violence, abuse, death, and destruction.

At the very least, it is our responsibility to pray for the renewal of the world. What this day shouts is that it should be normative that we also seek to renew it, or our cries of “Alleluia” will be hollow, and our proclamation of the resurrection will be false. So, this day, I invite you into that place of new life, into that transformational experience of God that is Jesus’ resurrection; your life will never be the same. And that’s a good thing!

So today is an invitation into that new thing, that new life. And to that life we now rededicate ourselves as we renew our baptismal promises. All that remains of this sermon is to say this:

Alleluia! Christ is risen!. And for you to reply: “The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia.”