

Resurrection: The Christian Counterscript

April 8, 2007

“Worship without Sacrifice”

Rev. Broadbent:

The Day of Resurrection, the Sunday of all Sundays, in fact, the Sunday that makes all other Sundays what they are. This is why Christians gather on Sunday as their Sabbath day rather than Saturday, which was the Sabbath day for the people of their origin, the Jewish people. Sunday becomes the 8th day of creation, the day of a new creation, the Lord's Day. And by this day, all of the other Sundays of the year become “Little Easters.” Today is the Big Easter, and all the other Sundays are Little Easters, so that our entire year consists in weeks that begin and end with the Resurrection Proclamation.

But we do not always act like we are the people of the resurrection. Frederick Nietzsche criticized the Christians of his time, perhaps rightly, when he said something to the effect of, “These Christians say that they believe in new life. They say they believe in a risen Lord. They say that now, in God's love, all things are possible. Why do they go around with such somber looks on their faces all the time, acting as if Easter never really happened?”

Today's sermon is part 2 of a two-part sermon that began last week. I introduced this notion of the script by which we live. I got this notion from the biblical scholar, Walter Bruggemann who contends that the script by which most of us in our culture live is the therapeutic, consumerist, technological, militarism script. It would take a long time to unpack all of these different terms; but essentially our culture tells us that no matter what problem we have, it can be solved, definitively, either through therapy, by consuming more things, by creating and using just the right form of technology, and backing all this up with enough military might to assure that we will always have it.

I probably do not need to tell you, but we do need to remind ourselves that this script ultimately has failed us. Yes, there are some wonderful things that can happen through therapy, through the things that people have that make lives more comfortable, through the technology. There are some people sitting here, if it were not for technology, they would not be here right now. It would be naïve of us to think that we could just take all of our military spending and put it into something else that we would even last for very long.

But the question is: Do these things give ultimate meaning? Do they offer ultimate purpose to life? They claim that they do. But we, as the people of the resurrection, know better. It was difficult last Sunday, at the beginning of Holy Week, to acknowledge that to begin to acknowledge the script has failed is to not turn away from the cross but to face our own and another's suffering and to allow it to be what

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it is – that salvation, or healing, comes by acknowledging and baring our own and another’s suffering.

It begins there, but it does not end there; for today, we consider the counterscript. The dominant script in our society has failed us, but we are not bereft. We are not going to despair, for we have a counterscript; and we can discern this counterscript in the narrative from Luke that Pastor Franklin just read. It hinges around this word that could be translated as “nevertheless,” “however,” or in our translation, the very first word of this resurrection account, “but on the first day of the week.” It is as if the Gospel writer Luke is taking us by the collar and saying, “It’s not the end of the story. Things are not going to turn out the way they always do. Something else happened this time.” We need to hear this word, even today, just as the followers of Jesus needed to hear this word in their day, “but on the first day of the week.”

Luke drives it home. In twelve verses, he uses the word “but” six times. It almost reads a little bit awkwardly as you go through it. “But on the first day of the week at early dawn they came to the tomb.” “They,” the women, “they,” who stuck by him at his death, at his burial, and here at his resurrection. “They came to the tomb taking the spices they had prepared, presumably now to use those spices to anoint the body, which could not have been anointed the day before, because it was the Sabbath day, and on the Sabbath day; you were not allowed to do that type of work.

They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly, two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. Luke wants us to recall the moment of transfiguration, when Jesus is on the mountain top; and two other figures appeared. They were all dressed in glowing white.

The women were terrified by these two figures and bowed their faces to the ground. But the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you while he was still in Galilee ...” The other Gospel writers at this point direct the women, and then the disciples, to go back to Galilee. They tell them that Jesus is waiting for them there. For Luke, he puts his entire narrative there, within Jerusalem. Things need to happen immediately. But he does recall Galilee as the place where Jesus told them that the son of man must be handed over to sinners and be crucified and on the third day arise again.

Then they remembered his words; and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. For those of you with feminist sensibilities, you will love the fact that it is to the women that these two figures appear. It is to the women that this good news is given; and in particular, in Luke, they are revealed this wonderful and terrifying truth of the empty tomb. Then they are not told to go tell the disciples, which means that they are not merely messengers, but that they themselves are disciples and that they themselves have the choice of what to do with that information.

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It named several of them – Mary Magdalene; Joanna; Mary, the Mother of James; and the other women. Luke goes to great pains to show that it was not just the twelve, and then without Judas, just the eleven, but that there were many, many disciples, men and women. And these women went and told this to all of the apostles. But those of you with feminist sensibilities will also smile when you hear that the men, when told, think that it is an idle tale.

Ah, that cannot be true. But somehow Peter had the wherewithal to get up and to run to the tomb; and there is that word again, but Peter got up. He heard it was an idle tale, but Peter got up and ran to the tomb. Stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and then he went home, amazed at what has happened.

Something contrary to expectations has happened. Something outside the normal course of events has happened. Something other than what you would think would be the case in that moment has happened.

Now there has been a lot of debate about what actually happened. I personally come down on the side of thinking that these Gospel accounts, including Luke's account, were not written, and should not be read, as a historical account. It is written as a proclamation, as a description of the inexplicable, that is, that something incredible happened.

Stories were told. There were actually two different traditions. One was the empty tomb tradition. I call it the terrified tradition. We got there; the tomb was empty; we did not know what happened. That is where the Gospel of Mark ends. The other tradition within the early church was the tradition of the appearances, where the risen Lord appears to the disciples. And it is always mysterious, not like a historical account but like a deeply, meaningful, mythological, dripping with purpose account.

Somehow the resurrection accounts are not merely historical. They are somehow truer than history. They are truer than that which can just be accounted for. They try to describe something that, in fact, may not be accounted for. They provide a counterscript. That which defies our expectation. That which tells the other half of the story.

You see, the first half of the story is the Friday story – that he suffered, that he was crucified, that he was delivered into the hands of sinners, and then he was buried in a tomb. That is what happens, right? When people die, that is a complete story.

The other half of the story is this – that something happened and we are not the same since. Something happened, and that is why we are gathered in this room today. Something happened; that is why we gather every Sunday. Something happened; that is why we even try to call ourselves Christian and follow in the way of the one who showed us the way.

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During the season of Lent, we have been following the theme of the seven deadly social sins – seven deadly social sins, as articulated by Mahatma Gandhi. On the very first Sunday, when I was discussing what it might mean to confess politics without principle, I quoted Gandhi. The quote bares repeating, because the quote names the counterscript to which Jesus points us. Gandhi said, “When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love has always won. There have been tyrants and murderers and wars and empires, and for a time they seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall.” Think of it – always. That’s the counterscript. That is the counterscript.

While we find ourselves bogged down with politics without principle, the counterscript says, “He is not here, but he is risen.” When we find ourselves diminished by wealth without work, the counterscript tells us, “He is not here, but he is risen.” When we find ourselves helpless in the face of commerce, without morality, the counterscript tells us, “He is not here, but he is risen.”

When we find ourselves harmed by pleasure, without conscious, the counterscript tells us, “He is not here, but he is risen.” When we find ourselves threatened by education without character, the counterscript tells us, “He is not here, but he is risen.” When we find ourselves dehumanized by science without humanity, the counterscript tells us, “He is not here, but he is risen.”

And today, as we confess a worship without sacrifice, a worship that is merely going through the motions, a worship that is nice and makes us smile in the moment but does not change our lives when we leave this place, the counterscript offers, “He is not here, but he is risen.”

Friends, we are the people of the elusive, erasable God, the people of the resurrection. For us, the resurrection does not deny history, but is truer than history. For us, we are committed to telling the whole story. So with one arm, we embrace an unflagging realism with regard to the suffering, destruction, and death that really happens, that is right now happening in the world. And with the other arm, we embrace a stalwart hope in God’s redemptive love. And the question we ask the world is, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not dead, but ...”

Taping ends.