

"We Are a Resurrection People and Alleluia is Our Song!"

Last Sunday we celebrated All Saints Day, remembering the saints who have gone before us and passed on to the next life. On All Saints Day we as a church face the reality of death, and hold to the promise of life after death. Our Scripture this week is a post-resurrection account – the third encounter of the disciples with the risen Lord. But this resurrection narrative is not about the after-life, but about how we as followers of Jesus live **this** life. This week we also read the chapter in Richard Rohr's *Universal Christ* on the resurrection. A central theme for Rohr is that resurrection is not just about Jesus rising from the dead; it is not even limited to the promise that we will rise from the dead to an afterlife. Rohr's perspective is that resurrection – life springing from death – is a pattern of the universe and of nature as created by God. We see a visual reminder of this phenomena in the fall -- trees lose their leaves, which fertilize the ground, providing nutrients for the next season's growth and space for the new leaves to grow. And so it is for us: we suffer loss and failings in our life, but those events can result in a new season of life and growth.

Our Scripture passage reflects this pattern of resurrection in our lives, and provides clues about how we might live into it. Taking place just a few days after Jesus' death and resurrection, it reflects the loss and confusion that plagued the disciples in the aftermath of Jesus' crucifixion. As if to say, "I'm going to get on with my life," Peter abruptly says, "I'm going out to fish." Peter is returning to his old occupation and his old way of being. He and the others fish all night, but despite being skilled fishermen, catch nothing. As they head in, they see someone standing on the shore whom they don't immediately recognize. The man asks "haven't you caught any fish?" The Greek form of question here contains an

assumption that the answer to the question is “no.” The disciples acknowledge they have caught nothing, and the man tells them that if they throw their nets out to right side they will catch some fish. They do as directed, and their nets instantly brim with an enormous catch of 153 fish. The disciple John realizes that it must be Jesus on the beach. Hearing this, Peter pulls on a garment, jumps into the lake, and swims to Jesus, while the rest of the disciples tow the catch to shore.

On the beach they find Jesus tending a fire of burning coals, cooking bread and fish. He invites the disciples to gather around the fire. It’s a primal image that you can almost picture in your mind – hungry, tired, cold, and wet after a night of fishing, they gather around the fire to get warm and get some food.

But the situation is not entirely comforting for Peter. In the midst of Jesus’ ministry, Peter had sworn to Jesus that he would never deny Him. But when things got rough on the night before Jesus’ crucifixion, Peter did deny Jesus three times. Can you imagine the shame and remorse that Peter must have felt? After realizing the import of his denials, Peter “wept bitterly.” In John Chapter 18, it is emphasized before two of the denials that Peter was standing near a fire of coals, trying to get warm. So a few days later, to be standing on a beach in a wet garment around a charcoal fire trying to get warm while Jesus takes care of him must have amplified Peter’s shame.

In the midst of this déjà vu experience, Jesus gives Peter a path forward, a path towards resurrection for the man who will become the foundation of the church. Three times, Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him. Three times, Peter swears that he does. Our Scripture tells us that by the third asking of the question, “Peter was hurt” because Jesus kept asking him this question. It’s probably safe to assume that he was hurt because the three-fold repetition of the question is

nagging at the wound Peter feels around his three-fold denials of Jesus at the cross.

The trauma that Peter felt over denying Jesus – a place where Peter lacked the courage to stand up for what he believed in – is undone by Jesus giving Peter three chances to affirm his love. Peter has a resurrection moment here. This is not a “you will never die” resurrection moment, for the conversation ends with a reminder of the kind of death Peter will die. But the story shows that we can find resurrection in forgiveness; in understanding that we all fail in some ways in our lives but God is constantly calling us to something new. We can find resurrection in grace extended to us by others.

How does this Scripture relate to us? One of the places where people most face shame and being out of control is around addictions. In his book, *Immortal Diamonds*, Richard Rohr observed that: “Death is not just physical dying, but going to full depth, hitting the bottom, going the distance, beyond where I am in control, fully beyond where I am now . . . When you go into the depth and death, sometimes even the depths of your sin, you come out the other side – and the word for that is resurrection.” It is often said that addicts must hit bottom before getting help. Now I want to make clear that I am not just talking about drugs and alcohol here. We all have our own addictions, our own places where we hit bottom. We may be addicted to the pursuit of wealth or possessions, or our body image, or the way that we want others to perceive us. Whatever the addiction is, it is a partial death to the freedom and love that God calls us to. I am no expert on twelve step programs, but I do know is that the twelve steps invite us to seek resurrection in God. The twelve steps call us to believe in a higher power that can restore us to sanity; to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God; to

acknowledge and humbly ask God to remove our shortcomings; to improve our conscious contact with God; and to use a spiritual awakening to serve others. Our faith can lead us to a resurrection experience, an experience born of submission to God and a path out from things that bind us and trap us.

There is a second component to this resurrection exchange between Jesus and Peter. Each time Peter affirms his love for Jesus, Jesus encourages Peter to “Feed” or “take care of my sheep.” In these exchanges, Jesus is essentially saying, “if you love me, then serve others in the world.” Jesus encourages Peter, at the end of this narrative, to “Follow me!”

About 15 years ago, I was at a cross-roads in my life. I was a lawyer practicing civil litigation. My firm was successful, but that was a two-edged sword; our success allowed my partners to retire earlier than I had expected. As the firm shrunk, I faced a dilemma: what do I do next? Retire myself and play golf? Join a different law firm? Find new partners for my existing firm? Pursue some other sort of endeavor? I spent nearly a year in spiritual direction examining this issue. I eventually prayed that God would reveal to me where I was being called. A few weeks later I went on a mission trip to a rural village in Nicaragua that we were supporting. There was another lawyer on the trip, and he seemed to seek me out as a fellow lawyer. Mostly he wanted to talk about legal issues, and the cases we were involved in, and what our law firms were like. I have to say that was not why I was on the trip and not really what I wanted to talk about.

The last afternoon of the trip we helped the villagers plant a field of squash – a harvest, by the way, which was ultimately so abundant that it resulted in the owner of the field being able to retire all of her debt and become self-sustainable. The villagers said that we needed to put fertilizer in with the seeds. I looked

around in vain for bags of fertilizer. When I asked the villagers where the fertilizer was, they smirked in response. They grabbed the other lawyer and me, taking us over to the chicken coop. They handed us a three by three square wood frame with mesh on the bottom. Then they pointed to a pile of chicken poop. We were to shovel the chicken poop into the square frame, and then shake the frame back and forth. This turned the chicken manure into a powdery dust of fertilizer. It was about 95 degrees with 95% humidity, and as we shook the frame, some of the chicken manure floated up into the air. We were soon sweating and coated with chicken manure dust. But one of our group members was nearby teaching village children how to play mandolin. The women in our group were chatting contentedly with the Nicaraguans about the dating and marriage practices of Nicaragua. Another member of our group loved horses, and she was cantering around a field riding bareback. We were serving and bonding with people who had been mired in poverty. It was an idyllic afternoon. Eventually the other lawyer looked over at me, grinned, and said, "I haven't felt this alive in 20 years."

That comment was the answer to my prayer. Because I also felt powerfully alive that afternoon. That other lawyer came back to Seattle, and resumed practicing law. But I realized that if I wanted to capture this sense of being fully alive – of being resurrected – I needed to do more things like that mission trip to Nicaragua. And so I came back to Seattle and enrolled in seminary at Seattle University.

Catholic theologian Karl Rahner identified one of the central mysteries of Christian faith: you find life by giving life to others. We can see that in parenting relationships, in marriage, in mission. In 1st Corinthians, the Apostle Paul observes that "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all,

and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” Did you hear that? The meaning of death and resurrection is that “those who live should no longer live for themselves.”

The ancient theologian St. Augustine once observed that “We are a resurrection people, and Alleluia is our song.” What does it mean for you to be a resurrection people? Maybe it means remembering when in this life you felt most alive, and then living into that in some way. Maybe it means that you were lost and/or broken, and finding healing and wholeness. Maybe it means that you live as part of a community of saints. Maybe it even means that you failed at something, and either learned from it and moved forward or tried it again and succeeded. For those of you who don’t know, the word Alleluia means “praise God.” May our resurrection lives be a song of praise to the One who lives and breathes upon us; the one who was, and is, and will be.

Amen