

The First Presbyterian Church

Charlotte, NC

Sunday, April 29, 2012

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## **“Practicing Resurrection”**

Acts 4:5-12

It's been three weeks since Easter. The ham is long since eaten, the eggs are all picked up from the yards (I hope!). The colorful dresses and ties have been pressed into service for other events, and we move on- to the end of the school year, graduations, summer plans, and so much more. It's the rhythm of life.

It happens throughout the year, with birthdays and anniversaries, family reunions and holidays, busy seasons at work, and volunteer commitments. So many of the things we are about in life have schedules, and so we mark them on our calendars, we look forward to them, plan for them, live them, and then move on to the next thing.

This rhythm is so pervasive that even Easter isn't immune to it. But it should be. It is, along with Christmas, the defining and identifying observance of our faith, yet it has become for so many of us, just another day.

In today's Presbyterian church, we have largely gotten away from the Eastertide observance, but years ago, our forefathers and mothers in the faith extended their Easter observance beyond one Sunday. For many Christians, the fifty days after Easter, culminating in Pentecost, were an extension of the Easter

celebration, and every Sunday in that time was Easter Sunday. Eastertide continued the celebration of the resurrection for seven Sundays.

It's worth it for us to consider how Christians have historically extended the Easter observance over seven Sundays, but I would argue, that in addition to Eastertide, we should think about how we extend our Easter celebration to 52 Sundays. You have heard it said, I am sure, that every Sunday is Resurrection Sunday.

When we claim the victory won by Christ over the grave, we ought not just to celebrate it once and be done until the next year. What Jesus did on the cross and defeated in the grave is so radical, so transformative, so important that it ought not to be relegated to one Sunday a year. If it matters at all to us, then it ought to transform our lives so that we live resurrection every day, every week of every year, throughout our lives.

This thought was running through my mind not long ago when I went to see a movie. If you can get past its awkward title, *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* is a beautiful, interesting film that is well worth a watch. Its premise is odd- a modern-thinking sheikh in the Middle Eastern emirate of Yemen, who happens to own an estate in Scotland and be an avid fly-fisherman, decides that he wants to bring the sport of salmon fishing to his native land. Undeterred by the fact that salmon are not native to Yemen, and the climates of Yemen and Scotland are quite different, desiring to bring a sport he loves to the land he loves, he sets out to realize his dream.

Enter Dr. Alfred Jones, a solemn scientist employed by the British government, plodding along in a loveless marriage and a respectable but dull government research position. A researcher and thinker by nature and vocation, Dr. Jones is skeptical of the sheikh's project from the outset. But his protests that it could never work are overruled by the needs of the Prime Minister's overbearing and

bullish Press Secretary for a “feel-good” story coming out of the Middle East.

Much to his chagrin, Dr. Jones is forced into the salmon project in Yemen. He goes to visit the sheikh at his beautiful, sprawling Scottish estate, and though they are very different- one a wealthy and devout Muslim, the other a quiet, bookish, agnostic Scot, the two men bond over their passion for fishing.

In a poignant and powerful exchange, the matter of faith comes up between the two men. Over dinner, as the sheikh shares his dream with the scientist, he says, “it would be a miracle of God if it were to happen.” Dr. Jones dismisses this, stating that he is compelled more by facts and figures than by faith. The sheikh challenges him back, questioning how he can be a fisherman and not be a man of faith.

“How many hours do you fish before you catch something?” he asks, to which Jones replies, “hundreds, sometimes.” The sheikh wonders out loud if that is a worthwhile use of time, for a man who dedicates his life to reason and science. He goes on to say, “but you persist, with such poor odds of success. . . because you’re a man of faith.”

This argument doesn’t win the scientist over right away, but it plants a seed. I won’t give away the ending, but it’s a Hollywood movie, and so you can guess how it goes. What struck me as I reflected upon the movie was its artful illustration of the key aspect of the Easter message. Through an utterly ridiculous project that had no business being created, lives were changed. Dr. Jones was pulled out of a life of meaninglessness and tedium and given purpose, hope, and even faith.

Isn’t that, essentially, what the Easter message is about?

The Easter truth proclaimed by Peter and John in the early days of the church is not confined to their testimony, or to the pages of the

Bible. *The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone* is the Easter story, both then and now. It's not just a dramatic element to make the story more compelling.

The one who conquered sin and death is the same one who was rejected, humiliated, beaten and spat upon. He was the one who was born in a cattle trough and walked dusty roads, relying upon others for food to eat and a place to lay his head. He was challenged at every step along the way, judged by others and found wanting in just about every way. He was not the logical, practical, or even reasonable choice for savior of the world. He was the stone that the builders rejected.

And he saved us all.

Faith can't be explained by reason, by facts or by statistics. If it could, then it wouldn't be called faith. Maybe that's why, as a preacher who isn't a fisherwoman, I was so taken by that movie scene, because I got what the sheikh was trying to say.

There's nothing entirely logical, especially in this day and time, in standing knee deep in a river, casting a tiny line attached to a worm, or a bit of fish, or a fancy fly into the water, trusting that at just the right moment, a hungry fish is going to come by and chomp down hard enough on that irresistible bait to be reeled in.

Throwing out a big net makes more physical sense. Going to the fish market and buying fish someone else caught makes more practical sense. Yet every day, thousands of people bait their hooks, wade out into the water, cast their lines, and wait. They're not doing it because it practical, or because reason drove them to it.

Though we necessarily live parts of our lives ruled by practicality, driven by timelines and results, efficiency and reason, at some point we all come to realize that that's simply not all that there is to life. No matter how hard we try to make it be otherwise, life simply does not proceed in a straight line. Our best-laid plans don't always take

us to the spot we intended, and it is in those moments that we begin to understand, at least a little bit, what faith really is.

Faith is trusting in God, no matter what, believing that God is at work even when we can't see it, can't feel it, can't imagine that it is possible.

Think about how the women and the disciples must have felt when Jesus died, and then three days later when they realized that the tomb was empty and it wasn't because the grave had been robbed. It didn't compute. How could it? It took a while to wrap their minds around something so unpredictable, unbelievable, and unexplainable. But it was true. Though they had seen him crucified just three days before, Christ was alive.

It defied reason, but they took it on faith. And that unimaginable truth set into motion God's new work in our midst- the work of the church. Peter and John went from faithful but clueless disciples to articulate and fearless evangelists. Paul was transformed from virulent persecutor to faithful proclaimer. A faith that started out as little more than a sect within Judaism spread throughout the world despite indifference, opposition, and persecution. It doesn't make sense, from a rational perspective. It doesn't have to.

*The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.*

He was rejected and killed, yet he was raised from the dead- to save us from our sins AND to send us out to tell his good news. In Jesus Christ, God takes us from the depths of pain and suffering to the heights of glory, and calls us to embrace his story and live it in our lives. That may seem like a daunting task, because Christ's resurrection is so large, so amazing, so divine. But if we really think about it, it's not actually such a reach for us to practice resurrection in our own lives.

Each of us has, at one time or another, wades into the waters of uncertainty, sometimes up to our knees and sometimes up to our necks. We clutch our faith with all that we have and cast our lines out into the unknown, knowing that we can't control what will happen, but that that's not our job. Ours is simply to cast the line, and wait – in faith. And, often, what we pull out isn't exactly what we expect, but it is what we need.

The truth is, if we look closely around us, we see little resurrections everywhere. A task that once seemed impossible suddenly seems probable. A dream that was once remote is now within arms' reach. A relationship that seemed irretrievably broken begins to mend. A difficult and unwelcome challenge opens up moments of grace you otherwise never would have known.

This, friends, is the Easter truth we are called to embrace, not just one day a year, but every day of our lives. Resurrection is God's will for his creation, and it happens in ways large and small, all the time. In his book, *Falling Upward*, Richard Rohr describes it this way: "The genius of the Gospel was that it included the problem inside the solution. The falling became the standing. The stumbling became the finding. The dying became the rising. The raft became the shore."<sup>1</sup>

Resurrection is not confined to one day. It is not an event; it is our reality as children of God and followers of Christ, one we are called to live into with all that we do. Practicing resurrection means living out our faith, not because reason and science tell us it's right, but because we trust in the one who was rejected yet embraces us all. He is the one who brings wholeness and healing, turning death into life and showing us the way.

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2011), p. 159.