

WORSHIP

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Low Sunday

By the Reverend Katherine C Kerr

John 20:19-29

April 8, 2018

Welcome to Low Sunday. Did you know that's what today is called? I always thought it was sort of an inside church joke, making light of the fact that attendance usually drops off from the high of Easter, and throughout the land, associate pastors and guest preachers take to pulpits as the primary preachers take some hard earned vacation after the strenuous ecclesial demands of Lent and Holy Week. But I've recently learned that it's more than just a church nerd joke- Low Sunday is a real thing – it's actually in the dictionary, and the phrase appears in numerous church publications, particularly in the highly liturgical Roman Catholic and Episcopal churches, where each Sunday of the year has its own name and designation.

The descriptions of Low Sunday are always similar to what I just mentioned, though I did find one that I thought was interesting. The Collins English dictionary describes the origin of the term this way: “[it is] probably so named because of its relative unimportance in contrast with Easter Sunday.”

Well, that's not very nice. Sure, Easter is a very big deal for those of us who seek to follow Christ. It is one of the foundational celebrations of our faith, along with Christmas, and it is important. But that doesn't make other Sundays unimportant. In fact, it is precisely what we celebrate on Easter that makes every other Sunday just as important.

I have kind of an affinity for Low Sunday, I must admit. Maybe it's the underdog thing- you know, it's hard not to root for the one no one sees coming. I love the big, fancy celebrations like most of you, but I also really appreciate the regular days too.

I gather every Thursday morning with a group of women for a time of fellowship and Bible Study, and for the past few weeks, we've been reading a book by Frederick Buechner



entitled *The Remarkable Ordinary*. I chose the book for our consideration in large part because of its title- I was taken by the contrast between those two words, and the richness of what is held between them. We're not used to thinking of something that is ordinary as being remarkable, but that is exactly what Buechner challenges his reader to do in this book- to look at our lives and see that, even in the simplest, most mundane, most forgettable moments, God is there. Even on Low Sunday.

It goes against our nature, I think. It's not so hard for us to feel God's presence in the remarkable moments- on Easter Sunday when the sanctuary is adorned with lilies, the trumpets sound and the hallelujahs ring out, even the most stoic among us is moved. But in the ordinary days, it can be more of a challenge to find that experience of God's presence. In juxtaposing these two opposites, Buechner highlights a profound truth - much of our time is spent living between two ends of the spectrum of human life.

I've been thinking a lot about opposites lately, as I've contemplated the highs of Easter in contrast with this "low" Sunday. My daughter, Caroline, is 4 ½, and she's been thinking about opposites too. We sometimes play a game in the car where we try to come up with as many pairs of opposites as we can. We hit the obvious ones- happy/sad, good/bad, night/day, but inevitably Caroline runs out of ideas. The other day, she asked me, "what's the opposite of building?" and we had one of those interesting parent/child conversations in which I tried to describe the difference between nouns and adjectives and she was having none of it. She moved on to the alphabet game and that was that.

Life in the midst of opposing forces is challenging, there's no question. The passage from John that we heard just a moment ago gives us a glimpse into the lives of some people who were smack dab in such a quandary. They'd experienced the elation of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the devastation of his crucifixion and death. They'd gone from the confidence of being a part of something they truly believed in to the fear of being associated with someone who'd been executed. They'd been so sure that the one they were following was the Messiah, but then his death cast them into uncertainty.

And then, there he was. They were huddled together, locked in a room in their fear and confusion, and suddenly Jesus appeared, speaking peace into their chaos. The worst thing they could imagine had just happened, and then the most extraordinary, unimaginable thing happened- Jesus was there. The pendulum had swung once again.



But the thing about pendulums is that they don't stay put. They move. Jesus' resurrection appearance to the disciples was extraordinary, for sure- it was a peak moment for them, and for our world. But the world didn't stay there, not even for a few days.

We read that Thomas was the one disciple not in the room on that first Easter Sunday, and though he is often maligned as a doubter, the truth is that he's not unlike most of us- he didn't see this miraculous event with his own eyes, and outside the world didn't seem to be any different- Rome was still in power and most people still thought Jesus was dead, so why should he believe any different? His pendulum was still on the low of Jesus' death.

A week later, when the disciples were again gathered in a room behind closed doors, Christ reappeared, and this time, Thomas saw the risen Christ and believed, uttering the first recorded proclamation of Jesus as God.

It should have changed the world, right? It should have, and in many ways, it did. But it didn't change the world the way the disciples thought it would. Jesus broke the powers of empire, crushing sin and death with his resurrection, which is great good news, but sin and death remain in our world, which is the hard truth of our human experience. The pendulum, as pendulums are wont to do, swung from one extreme to the other, and then eventually settled right in the middle.

There's a tension that those of us to seek to follow him must live in, and in theological circles, it has the weighty name of inaugurated eschatology. It's often referred to with the more user-friendly phrase "already and not yet." It's an acknowledgement that the Kingdom of God which all believers seek was brought to earth, to human reality, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but it is not yet consummated. It gives voice to the reality that God is already in our midst, but that God's divine purposes are not yet fully realized here on earth.

We see this play out in countless ways. We revel in the glory of Easter and the confidence-inspiring proclamation that Christ is risen, and yet we walk out of the sanctuary into a world in which fear, doubt, anxiety, greed and isolation still seem to reign. We believe in God the Father Almighty, yet sometimes we wonder who's really in charge when innocent children are murdered at school, when fatal disease knocks on our door, when the relationship we've longed for and worked for crumbles. We trust in Jesus Christ, yet worry about our financial security in the face of unstable markets and a changing economy. We long



for the presence of the Holy Spirit, yet we turn to television and social media, sports and shopping to distract us from the things that cause us discomfort. We live in the tension of the already and the not yet.

Kate Bowler is a professor at Duke Divinity School, a wife and mother, an expert on the Prosperity Gospel movement in American religion, and a stage IV cancer patient. She's recently published her second book, titled *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*. It's a powerful, funny, moving account of her coming to terms with her illness in the framework of her life and her faith. In a recent interview, she was asked to comment on "the age-old question, 'why do bad things happen to good people?'" and this is what she said:

My answer is pretty simple: The Kingdom of God is not yet here. That's why bad things happen. But when you are steeped in a culture that holds to boomerang theologies – that everything good comes back to you – it can feel a lot like spiritual abandonment when everything comes apart. . . The bizarre beauty of tragedy is that Christ promises to meet us there. It's one of the only things I know to be absolutely true. When everything fell apart, God was still there.

When everything fell apart for Kate Bowler, God was still there, in the friends who appeared unbidden to sit with her in her hospital room, in the steady presence of her husband, the stoic resolve of her father, and the unbridled joy of her son. When everything fell apart for the disciples, God was still there, in Jesus' presence with them in a locked room, in Jesus' patience with Thomas' need to see for himself, in his blessing of peace. When everything falls apart for you, God will still be there.

It is the truth of Easter Sunday, the truth of Low Sunday, and the truth of every other day of our lives. But it is a truth that can be hard for us to believe, and hard for us to accept. In *The Remarkable Ordinary*, Frederick Buechner tells of his quest for faith and spirituality as a college student and young adult. He hadn't grown up in the church, but there was something within him that kept drawing him to places and people of faith.

He recounts a time when, as he says, he felt "unclean, uncertain, at sea." He had heard people speak of a monastery in New York State called the Order of the Holy Cross, and he decided to pay it a visit. He was looking for a wise priest about whom he had heard wonderful things, but he found that that priest had taken a vow of silence and wasn't



accepting any visitors. The only other person available to speak with him was the guest master, a monk who had recently had a stroke, and his speech was not something Buechner was able to understand. And so, as he says, he went looking for answers, but instead he “got silence, the sense of mystery, the sense of holiness.” And, as it turns out, that was enough.

We live in the tension of the already and the not yet, and that can be hard. We want answers to our questions – questions about why some things happen and other things don’t, about how things are going to work out, and about where God is. And we don’t often get the answers, at least not in ways that seem satisfactory.

But sometimes, in the midst of the high and the low, caught in the tension of the sacred and the profane, in between the already and the not yet, we get a glimpse of that sense of mystery and holiness about which Buechner spoke. And we discover, yet again, that God is still there.

One of those times is about to happen. When we gather at the Lord’s Table to experience this feast, we are participating in a practice that goes back to Jesus’ life, and points ahead to his resurrection, a gift of grace that invites us to step out of the tension for just a moment to experience the peace that only God is able to give. And then, nourished by the body and blood of our risen Lord, we are strengthened to go out into the world as witnesses to and proclaimers of his great good news, that his kingdom is in our midst. Already and not yet.

Thanks be to God.

