

What Is Reconciliation? Witnesses to Resurrection

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Acts 10:34-43 and Matthew 28:1-10

One definition of “reconciliation” has to do with accounting. It is good for our family that I am not responsible for reconciling anything financial. Nonetheless, allow me to present a simple equation for today: $A + B + C = \text{something extraordinary}$. Another way to say it is “resurrection + proclamation + demonstration = reconciliation.”

But before all of that, allow me to share the ancient words “Christ Is Risen!” with you and to welcome you to Third Presbyterian Church on this most extraordinary of days. Welcome all of you – from every worldly condition and every faith experience, or no faith experience. Welcome especially, as you have heard, visitors and guests. We are not overbooked this morning, so please be assured that you will not be forcibly removed from your pews! And please do visit us again – to explore faith, to share your time in service, to connect in community. Our tagline is “Seeking the Light,” and that is exactly what we aspire to do. We’d love to welcome you to our community of seekers. So welcome, all of you, and may the blessings of this day be yours, and may our broken and fearful world experience something of the Easter hope we experience this morning.

Resurrection + proclamation + demonstration = reconciliation.

You are here, we are here, because of ***resurrection***. The pivotal moment in history. This morning we encounter Matthew’s version of the Easter story. It is, on one level, so very dramatic. Earthquake. Angel. So much fear. On another level, it is so very human. Mary and Mary, the guards, lots of fear. And their great joy.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “What happened in the tomb was entirely between Jesus and God. For the rest of us,” Taylor writes, “Easter began” the moment the angel greets the women and Jesus greets the disciples. “That is where the miracle happened and goes on happening — not in the tomb but in the encounter with the living Lord.”

This has epic implications. But it also has intimate ones. Faith is never only and just about a personal encounter with the risen Jesus. But the risen Jesus comes to individuals, to Mary and Mary, to an often-times bumbling band of followers. That means he comes to you as well. And me. The empty tomb on the grandest of stages and the empty tomb in each of our hearts and spirits. Each of us. And all of us. Resurrection. An encounter with the living Jesus.

And ***proclamation***. What is the message? Jesus tells us to go and tell. We turn to the book of Acts, the story of the early church to see what that looks like. Peter, who had been at the tomb, now is leading the church. He encounters Cornelius, a soldier, a Gentile. In a dream, Peter comes to understand that he’s had it all wrong, that the point is not narrowness, but expansiveness, not exclusion, but embrace. He preaches a powerful sermon. “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in *every* nation *anyone* who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” No partiality. No favorites.

Peter has misunderstood it all along. This has not been about maintaining tight control over a small, like-minded group of believers. This is about an ever-widening, ever-broadening circle, with no credential needed, no artificial qualification, no pre-existing condition, no litmus test. An ever expanding table with a place for all, until all are welcome. This is not in spite of resurrection. This is *because* of resurrection.

The message of resurrection lies in the healing of deeply divided people and groups. The empty tomb transcends stereotypes and labels and can heal deep wounds and divisions. If a Jewish believer and a Gentile seeker can find common ground at the empty tomb, then so can all of us.

Eric Barreto writes that “No matter our place of origin, the same God reaches out to us; the same gospel calls us home. Social boundaries and ethnic differences are no obstacle to the gospel. Such differences are not an irritant in need of remediation or a problem for God's church.”

Jamie McCallum writes that “we should not be surprised to hear that God accepts Syrians, North Koreans, and Mexicans just as passionately as (God) accepts Americans, Russians, and Japanese, but... (that) impartiality extends beyond nationalities – to political affiliations, denominational preferences, and social and economic standings... Because God is a God of impartiality,” McCallum writes, “so we must be a people of impartiality. Because God makes peace with all, we too, must make peace with others. The church has the calling and potential to be a community of peacemaking and radical reconciliation on this earth.” *A community of peacemaking and radical reconciliation on this earth.*

Resurrection + proclamation. Empty tomb + impartiality.

So what? How will this make a difference? **Demonstration**. Peter uses the word “witness” several times in his sermon. We think of witness as a legal term, a witness at a trial, or an in-your-face religious zealot. The Greek word is “*martyr*,” not in this case someone who dies for the faith – though that can be the case – but one who bears witness, who testifies, who shares the story, who embodies – in words, yes, and at a deeper level in actions and relationships and commitments. To be a messenger whose job is not so much to make people believe, but to “reveal the character of God.”

Resurrection + proclamation + demonstration...

Empty tomb + no partiality + a church practicing radical welcome...

Those are the ingredients for **reconciliation**. We are observing a Year of Reconciliation at Third Church. In a way, every moment leads to this one, and every moment flows from it. *Resurrection is the epicenter of reconciliation*, its pivot point. Every other kind of reconciliation, in our souls, in our relationships, in the church, in the world, happens because the stone has been rolled away and the risen Christ comes to us. We need all these elements – inward, outward,

global, local – to practice reconciliation, to be the reconciling community Jesus calls us to be.

We don't always get it right. In this morning's *Times*, Nicholas Kristof asks Jimmy Carter "How can I reconcile my admiration for the message of Jesus, all about inclusion, with a church history that is often about exclusion?" President Carter responds: "In His day, Jesus broke down walls of separation and superiority among people. Those (mostly men) who practice superiority and exclusion (today) contradict my interpretations of the life and teachings of Jesus, which exemplified peace, love, compassion, humility, forgiveness and sacrificial love." ("President Carter, Am I a Christian?," *New York Times*, April 15/16, 2017)

We don't always get it right. Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, asserts that "If Christ is risen and the church is catholic (or universal), then there can be no 'sides.' The church simply *is* humanity made new, a new world in which the age-old divisions and boundaries and bigotries constitutive of human society have been transcended and rendered utterly obsolete... The resurrection is...God's unequivocal 'Yes' to all the diverse bits of humanity - it is God's commitment to a reconciled world." ("The Politics of Easter: Rowan Williams and the meaning of the empty tomb," Benjamin Myers, "ABC Religion and Ethics," 27 Mar 2013)

We don't always get it right. In a week of missiles and bombs, of mall shootings, of Virginia Tech anniversaries, of remembering Jackie Robinson's heroism, we know we don't always get it right. No human can. No human institution can.

But the formula of *empty tomb + no partiality + a church of witnesses practicing radical welcome equalling reconciliation* means that we have a roadmap for our journey, our always imperfect, always incomplete journey. Not always getting it right doesn't mean we always get it wrong. And it doesn't mean that the risen Christ is not always working through us.

The Presbyterian Confession of 1967, which we have been exploring this year in a fairly obsessive (!) way, gives us some hints to look at – race, gender and

sexuality, poverty, warfare and violence. Those are implications of resurrection and not simply trendy social issues. And they are tall orders.

The good news is that our efforts are fuelled by the empty tomb and the risen Christ, and they are mingled with the efforts of so many, past and present and future.

And get this...the Confession of 1967 affirms that “With an urgency born of this hope (the hope of resurrection), the church applies itself to present tasks and strives for a better world. It does not identify limited progress with the kingdom of God on earth, nor does it despair in the face of disappointment and defeat. In steadfast hope, the church looks beyond all partial achievement to the final triumph of God.”

Dear friends, we are witnesses to resurrection, messengers of the vision of the empty tomb, whose promise of impartiality and radical inclusion shows us what reconciliation looks like. That’s a lot. But it’s what is needed. We know that. And we have the capacity to share this vision, not because of who we are, but because the risen Jesus came to his friends and keeps coming to them.

Author Marylynne Robinson writes “I have a theory that the churches fill on Christmas and Easter because it is on these days that the two most startling moments in the Christian narrative can be heard again...”

So...

Do not be afraid; be startled.

Do not be discouraged; be hopeful.

Do not be partial; be impartial.

Do not be broken; be reconciled.

Be a startled, hopeful, impartial, reconciled and reconciling witness.

Christ is risen. Alleluia! Go...and tell. Amen.