

April 8, 2012 / Easter Sunday / David L. Edwards

Practicing Resurrection

A few weeks ago I spoke about “practicing grace,” God’s unconditional, steadfast love for us and the world. It is not an idea, or a doctrine, but a reality we can touch and put into practice, toward ourselves, others, and the world. To me, that is the meaning of faith, not believing things that are hard to believe, not accepting certain religious doctrines in spite of our questions or objections. Faith is not only a matter of our heads but our whole lives. Faith is trustfully living the life for which we were created, the life Jesus taught, embodied, and awakens in us. That is what I mean by the word “practice”.

Today we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. I would like for us to consider “practicing resurrection.” Not the resurrection as some supernatural event in the past that just leaves us dumbfounded, unable to get any kind of handle on it, but resurrection as an event or power that we can experience and allow to shape the way we live. Practicing resurrection would mean that we live in such a way as to open ourselves to God’s power of new life. Mark’s resurrection story is a simple, unadorned story that stirs our imaginations as to what it might mean to live or practice resurrection.

In all four gospels, women are the first witnesses to the resurrection. This is very radical. In those days women did not have the legal or social status to serve as witnesses to anything. We see today the ever-recurring efforts to discount the status of women and their testimony to life. Women were very close to Jesus and were among his first followers. Maybe not the inner circle of the twelve, but the wider circle. Mark knows that the inner circle of men never fully grasped what Jesus was about, what he was trying to teach and show. At the end, all of them fled for their lives, abandoning Jesus to his suffering and death. Only the women continued to follow, even being present at Jesus’ crucifixion (Lk. 23:49; Jn. 19:25). Perhaps Mark is reminding us of Jesus’ words,

that the meaning of his teachings would be hidden from those who pride themselves on their intelligence or position, but revealed to the least and lowliest (Matt. 11:25, for example). It is our devotion, open hearts, and trusting spirits that enable us to touch the mystery of resurrection.

The women rise early in the morning to take spices to anoint Jesus' body, an expression of their love for the one who was their friend and teacher. On the way they realize that they won't be able to push back the stone that seals the grave. Still they walk on. Why not turn back? Why keep walking when the journey might be for nothing? So many times I have slowed my pace on this journey of faith when I thought of some stone up ahead that seemed too big for me to roll away. I see some inward or outward obstacle to the thing I feel called to do, blocking the way of my desire to be loving, or forgiving, or serving. It makes more sense to turn around, go back, and maybe come up with a better plan. Sometimes I have gone ahead, carrying my load of dread, or fear, or sense of futility. Sometimes, sure enough, there is that stone, the thing I feared, big as a mountain. And I have found that though it may not be removed, it has something to teach me. Sometimes it is not there, rolled back, or not as immovable as I feared it would be.

These women walking the road, with no idea how they will accomplish their deepest desire...maybe this is often what it is like to live our lives as a journey of faith. We feel called to do something out of our love for God and desire to follow Jesus, and we just keep moving on, step by step, not knowing how it will be accomplished. Or we become aware of something in ourselves that feels like an immovable stone blocking the way to our living more fully, freely, lovingly. If we are going to practice resurrection, it means that we keep on the journey, even when we do not have the answers or know exactly how we will do what we feel called to do. We keep going, trusting that a way will open somehow and in some form we cannot know beforehand.

The women arrive to find the stone rolled away. Inside the tomb they see a young man, robed in white. The women are "alarmed" at what they see - the stone rolled back, the empty grave, this odd young man. This word

(*thambeo*) is very strong. It means a profound amazement to the point of being overwhelmed and disoriented. It is more than merely being surprised; it is a feeling of deep disturbance because of something you did not expect, something that has to do with the scared depths of life, something that rocks your world.

The young man tells the women not to be alarmed. These words are spoken so often throughout scripture. Do not be afraid. Peace be with you. The opposite of faith is not doubt but fear. I wonder if fear is not the basis of most of our spiritual struggles? If we work with acknowledging our fears and understanding how they affect our living, and then open more and more to the deeper peace God speaks to our hearts, we get closer and closer to faith as trustful living. We become more ready to experience resurrection, new life. So, maybe we can say that practicing resurrection includes practicing peacefulness and calmness as we work with our fears, even in the midst of having your world rocked by something new, something you never counted on.

The young man tells them that Jesus is not in the tomb because he has been raised up. He is going on to Galilee, as he had promised, to meet up with his followers. The women are instructed to go and tell Jesus' disciples all of this, especially Peter. Another strong affirmation of the status of women--they are the ones to inform the men what is going on!

Why is Peter singled out? Because Peter needed special attention. Peter, the most precocious of the disciples, ended up flatly denying his association with Jesus when it threatened his own safety(14:66ff). Here is God's special concern for the one who seemed to have been the greatest failure, the greatest disappointment. God is not interested in blame or punishment, or our ideas of success and failure. God is interested in relationship and moving on. I don't think God wants us to sink into our sense of failure, of falling short. That always bothered me as I grew up in the church. To me it began to make no sense to sit around feeling bad about our sins, the things we had done wrong. Those are real enough, and we need to be aware of them. However, what I heard in the Christian story was God in Jesus absolutely pouring forgiveness and

love into us so that we could get up and follow, so that we, too, could rise up from our deadness and really live the way God made us to live. God is more interested in going on, starting the journey afresh with each new step. I wonder what it would mean for us to devote our spiritual energy to letting go of shame, guilt, our sense of failure or deficiency, instead of constantly rehearsing our sins and sinfulness? I wonder what a difference it would make if we paid more attention to letting go of self-preoccupation and allowed ourselves to move on to where Jesus wants to meet us and continue the journey? This, too, is part of practicing resurrection--being willing to moving on, leave our tombs of fear, guilt, self-preoccupation.

The story ends with the women fleeing in fear, maybe too confused and troubled to say anything to anyone. This is where Mark's gospel originally ended. In our Bibles we have other endings that were added on later, probably to smooth over what seemed to be too abrupt an ending, or to add something that would be more edifying. I like where Mark ended his gospel story. He doesn't wrap everything up for us. He doesn't try to dazzle us with glorious pictures of the risen Christ. Mark's ending leaves things unfinished and open. I think Mark knows that there is more to the life of faith than lofty endings that leave you warm and fuzzy, or that remove all the questions, struggles, and adventure from life. The women flee the tomb confused, troubled, and yet deeply stirred by what they have seen and heard. They are lost in the mystery of it all. To me this seems to be where we are today as we live the life of Jesus' community, as we seek to make our lives a journey of following him.

He is not here. He goes before you, to meet you in Galilee. There is this always-going-on nature to the life of faith. It is not a once and for all thing, of finding "the answer" and then settling in for the rest of our lives. It is like the women walking the road, not knowing how they will be able to express their love for Jesus with a huge stone in their way. It is like finding that stone removed, but then stumbling onto the deep mystery of death becoming life, suffering turning into joy, endings unfolding into beginnings...the mystery of the sacred dimension of life. And our journey of faith is always moving on toward

where Jesus will meet us, where we will find the living Christ. In the places where we feel he is calling us to be and to serve. The ministries and missions to which we have been or will be called. He will meet us here in our midst as we work with our commitments to be in community with one another, the community of his love and service. He will meet us in the persons to whom he is leading us or who are lead to us, those we are to help and who will help us. He has gone on ahead to meet us in the persons we are and are becoming through the work of our inward journey, as we become aware of and sometimes struggle mightily with the birth, or re-birth, of our true selves.

So, in the end, I wonder if Mark's story of the resurrection isn't about living the resurrection, never knowing when or where we are going to find new life just when we expected there would be only death or dead ends. I wonder if it is not about doing our best to live the life Jesus taught and lived, even when it seems to make no sense or seems hopeless, and finding from time to time, in our experience, that it truly is the way of life. I wonder if living the resurrection is not about recovering or re-discovering the kingdom of God, life the way God created it to be lived, a life so contrary to so much in the cultures in which we live. For me, that is what the crucifixion and resurrection story is about these days: going through the struggles, the challenges, the deaths that open us and lead us to life as God created it to be lived, for us and for the world.

I like the way the Kentucky poet and farmer Wendell Berry put it in the closing lines of a poem entitled "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front":

*So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it...
Practice resurrection.*