

“Death and Resurrection, Part 2”
February 19, 2023

Exodus 24:12-18
Matthew 17:1-9

“Death and Resurrection—Part 2.”

Now, if you’re wondering, “Did I miss ‘Part 1’? When was that?” you can relax.

I’m ahead of myself. Lent begins this coming Wednesday. And the title of my sermon for our worship that evening is “Death and Resurrection, Part 1.” So, in a sense I’ve got put the cart before the horse.

I’m seeking both to linger in the present as well as to look beyond the whole grim pageant of Lent, which Congregationalists long tended to avoid entirely.

We’ll be hearing a lot from the Book of Ecclesiastes during Lent. But some of its best and most accessible wisdom speaks to us in these final days *before* Lent: “There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink and find enjoyment; for these are from the hand of God.” The Bible study group found some hope and consolation in those words when we met last week. Keep them in mind as we move through the coming minutes and also through the coming days.

“There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink and find enjoyment; for these are from the hand of God.”

With those words echoing in our ears and in our souls, let us consider the good things of this life. These are the days of Carnival, of Mardi Gras, which call into question the somber and sullen ways in which we often live. As the poet, W.H. Auden once said, these days “celebrate the unity of our human race as mortal creatures, who come into this world and depart from it without our consent... To us as individuals, it is a cause for rejoicing that we are not alone, that all of us, irrespective of age or sex or rank or talent, are in the same boat.”

Another poet, T.S. Eliot, exhorts;

Let us mourn in a private chamber,
learning the way of penitence,

And then let us learn the joyful communion of saints.

When we are at our best, that what we do each week: we come together to remember that we are all in the same boat, to learn the joyful communion of saints.

So, before we enter those Lenten days of repentance and renewal, before we enter a time of looking at our own fallible, finite, and frail lives close up, we are given a chance to lift our eyes and see the distant horizon.

Before death—resurrection!

The story of the Transfiguration is often read in churches on this Sunday before the beginning of Lent. It is all about resurrection. So, we'll want to look closely and listen carefully to get our bearings for the days ahead.

While the account of the Transfiguration is strange and radically disconnected from all that we might call "real life," it is also a deep and rich story. When we hear this story in its larger context, we discover that it is filled with both challenge and comfort for us as we live our real lives.

Consider, then, how it begins: "Six days later..."

So, we ask: What happened six days *earlier*?"

Well, six days before Jesus went up that mountain with Peter, James, and John, he gathered his disciples and asked them: "Who do people say that I am?"

The answers started to come:

Some say that you are John the Baptist, who had recently been executed.

Or maybe you're Elijah the prophet, returned from the dead.

Maybe you are the fiery Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.

Then he tightened the circle of the discussion. "But," Jesus asked, "Who do *you* say that I am?"

Jesus addresses not individuals but his followers as a group. Jesus uses the second person plural. "What about *all* of you? This question is not for us as individuals alone. It is a question that still comes to us as a congregation.

Our individual answers are important because they inform our common answer.

Peter speaks for the group when he asserts: "You are the Christ, the very Child of the living God."

In our time and out of our Congregational UCC tradition, we speak together in our actions. We speak together in our common life. By what we do as well as what we say we tell the world who Jesus is—the One who welcomes the stranger and the outcast, the One who stands with the tortured, the One who is with us so that even in deep despair we find a deeper joy.

And then Jesus "began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering, . . . and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

Hearing these hard words, we affirm that in Jesus we encounter the God who suffers as we suffer, the God who knows the human experience of being wounded and hurting deeply;

in Jesus we discover the God who knows what it means to be rejected, to have the very best one has to offer be judged as insufficient;

in Jesus we confront the God who is to be stretched to the limits of life, finding the courage for life even in the face of death.

This Jesus doesn't always match up with what we are seeking—even if he fits very well with what we desire.

And now here we are, *six days later*, high on a mountain, squinting in the dazzling light.

We can't get much further from our own experience than when we encounter:

The fiery presence of God on Mt. Sinai,
the light coming from Jesus,
the light of God in the darkness of our own lives.

Out of the wonder and awe of this brightness we might live lives of love and mercy and kindness.

The voice of God comes out of a cloud. In a sense it is not strange that God should speak from a cloud. The holy is always hidden from us.

Amid all the change, that voice tells us to “listen” to Jesus.

We listen to Jesus—not just to what he says but also to what he *does*: how he lives and how he dies. We listen as well to “resurrection.”

We proclaim the resurrection: God's ability to bring life from death, and to hold all creation—the living *and* the dead—in God's great eternal love.

The voice of God speaks. The disciples fall to the ground in fear.

And here it comes once more.

We've heard it before—and we always seem to need to hear it again:

“Get up and *do not be afraid*”—this is the one thing that Jesus actually *says* in all of this.

“Get up.” In Matthew's gospel, when Jesus raises the dead, those are the words he uses. “Get up.” This is a call to new life in this life. It is a call to resurrection in this world. As we listen, we are being called to something new.

“Get up.” Resurrection is not something that happens to Jesus alone.

Resurrection is the new life that embraces us in our still wintry cold, calling us even in these days to set aside a frozen rigidity, calling us toward what Flannery O'Connor called the “spring and summer of God's will.”

Resurrection comes toward us and we hear the invitation: “Get up.”

“And do not be afraid.” I've said this often enough that you know this is the message of Matthew's Gospel from the angel who speaks to Joseph before Jesus is born to the angel who rolls away the stone at the empty tomb after the crucifixion. And here is Jesus with the same message: Do not be afraid.”

The road ahead will not always be smooth.

The road ahead will not always be easy.

Get up.

And as people of faith let us keep our sight on our destination: *resurrection*, new life, vitality.

The message still comes when we would least expect it—in the dark night of the soul, in the day of trial. That message is spoken by surprising voices in astonishing places. The message is still the same: At the center of all existence is a love that will not fail, a goodness that will stand.

This is the love of a God who comes to us in Jesus Christ, shares our life and suffering, knows our fears and sorrows. This is the love of a God who desires our good, who will be our strength.

“Do not be afraid.”

Matthew's account of the transfiguration speaks gently to us: “Be still and listen.” Look once more at the Christ whom we would follow. Listen to him as he speaks in scripture, through prayer, as we meet together. Listen as he speaks beyond these walls in new and unexpected ways. Be still. Be open to receive the gifts God offers.

This is why we often hear this story on this Sunday before Lent begins on Ash Wednesday—and why we need to hear it today. As we move toward a time of thinking about our own mortality—and even more about the life-giving death of Jesus—the curtain of reality is pulled back so that we can see where we are heading.

We get a glimpse of the *glory* of God. As we continue to move through these late winter days, look around: the light of God shines, calling us to new life, new challenges.

Calling us to resurrection.

There is a playful word of warning in Talmud, the Jewish commentary on the Hebrew scriptures, that says: “One will have to give an account in the judgment day of every good thing which one might have enjoyed and did not.”

Lent begins this coming Wednesday.

Of course, here we take some Congregational liberty and stretch our pre-Lenten festivities out into late Wednesday afternoon. We keep going with “Part 2” of death and resurrection as long as we can. So, before the Ash Wednesday worship service, join us down in Rockwood Hall—eat the fat sausage, the buttery pancakes, the eggs. Everyone is invited. Come back on Wednesday whether you have been a member here for years or this is the first time you've walked through our doors. Enjoy the goodness of the food. Take a chance and sit near someone you barely know or have never met. Enjoy the goodness of each other.

Several years ago, I was talking with a couple of people and a new member asked: “Do we always have pancakes on Ash Wednesday?”

A long-time member smiled and replied: “There is no ‘always’ here.”

There isn't. You never know when something new will replace what has been. Even pancakes aren't a sure thing. Take them when you can.

“Eat and drink and find enjoyment; for these are from the hand of God.”

Receive all the good things that Ash Wednesday and the days following offer for your life, for the life of this congregation, and, indeed, for the life of the world.