

April 11, 2004
Isaiah 65:17-25, John 20:1-18
Dr. Lewis Galloway

“Choose Life”

When our children were little, each one had a different approach to the beginning of school. Our daughter couldn't wait for kindergarten to start. A chain link fence separated the house in which we lived from an elementary school playground. She would literally hang on the fence wanting to go play with the other children. When her turn came to go to kindergarten, we had no trouble getting her to school. It was coming home that was the problem. We had to drag her away. It was all we could do to get another one of our children to go to school. We had to force him to get ready, to get in the car, to get out of the car, and to go into the classroom. At the last moment, there would be a terrible scene. I had to pry our child's hand loose from my own and place it as gently as I could into the hand of the teacher. It took all the emotional fortitude I had to manage the transfer of that precious life. All the while, there was another child at home all dressed up for school with a book bag strapped on the back, a peanut butter sandwich, juice box, and cookie packed in a Big Bird lunch box, ready to go to school, but too young to go anywhere.

Each one of us faces the unknown dimensions of the future with a different attitude. The future can terrify us or excite us or do a bit of both at the same time.

When Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb on Easter morning, she thinks that there is nothing unknown about the future. The future is dim, bleak and hopeless. The good days are all past. She goes to fix in her mind some memory of what had been. She clings to the past as hard as she can.

Then it happens. God turns everything upside down. John reports that Mary Magdalene finds the stone rolled back. Other gospel writers tell of an earthquake as if the thin membrane that separates heaven and earth ruptures. Overcome with shock and grief, Mary Magdalene cannot yet see what is happening. She thinks someone has taken the Lord's body. Mary stands outside the tomb and weeps. When she looks inside, she sees two angels sitting where the body of Jesus has been. They ask her why she is still weeping. Mary Magdalene is all business. She wants to know where the body of Jesus has been taken so that she can give it a decent burial. As soon as the question tumbles from her trembling lips, she sees a stranger standing next to her. He asks the same question, "Woman, why are you still weeping?" Assuming that the stranger is the gardener who would know what has happened, she asks him where they have put the body. She clings to the old world, when a new world is being born in her midst. Then he calls her by name, "Mary." When he speaks her name, she recognizes him in the sound of his voice. Her Lord is alive. The future, which seemed so barren, suddenly gives birth to a new hope.

Grief is transformed into joy. Mary takes hold of Christ. Jesus tells her not to touch him in a way that suggests in the Greek language that she is not to cling to him. She cannot hold onto his physical presence as she did before his death and resurrection. She cannot go back to what was. He has not yet ascended to the Father. He will be with her in the Holy Spirit. To find him, she cannot look back and long for what has been. To know him and to know his presence is to look forward in hope. By the resurrection of Jesus, God creates a new future.

The more we cling to the past, the more our grief overwhelms us. It is our future hope that transforms our grief. The more we welcome the future, the more joy we discover even as we struggle with loss. Sometimes we are like little children whose hands have to be pried off of what was in order to take hold of what is coming to be. We are afraid of change. We are afraid of being changed. There is a part of us that likes things just the way they are, that resists change, and that refuses new ideas. When we are afraid, we miss the joyful, abundant future that God has for us. The prophet Isaiah said that God is creating a new heaven and a new earth. What have we to fear when we know that the future belongs to God!

The resurrection of Jesus is not just something that affects us when we die. The resurrection of Jesus turns present life upside down. Jesus was resurrected “into history.” Eugene Peterson points out that we assume that resurrection “has to do with the next life; it is something that happens to you after you are dead and buried, and it places you secure in heaven for eternity. But Jesus’ resurrection took place on earth among the living... It was here on this familiar ground, in the company of these familiar friends, that they witnessed Jesus raised from the dead, alive, talking and eating in their company” (p. 14, *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2002).

God has unleashed the power of resurrection living among us. Resurrection life begins today. We join Mary Magdalene, the disciples, and countless others as witnesses to Jesus and his power to change life. We live each day in the power of the resurrection. Faith in Jesus was not just something to comfort us when we and those we love die. Resurrection faith opens our eyes to see Jesus in every person we meet and in each new place we go. Jesus is always ahead of us drawing us into God’s life.

Several years ago, I went to Brazil with the Outreach Foundation to study evangelism. We went on a Saturday morning to visit the New Life Presbyterian Church in Sao Paulo. We went to participate in a program the church sponsors with about sixty children from a nearby slum. The leaders of this ministry were eight high school students who were members of the church. These young people had formed a small praise band. They dedicated every Saturday morning to working with the children from the slum. These young teenagers were leading children who were not much younger than they were in songs and stories about Jesus. We were invited forward to tell stories which were translated into Portuguese. Then we sang together. It was amazing to watch the enthusiasm of the youth of the church who gave their time and talents so unselfishly. It was even more amazing to see the joy of the children who had so little of the world’s riches.

Before we left, several of the children were clamoring to sing a special song for us. One of our group who spoke Portuguese paraphrased the words: "It doesn't matter what you have or who you are, you are precious in the sight of God. God holds you in his heart. You are precious in the sight of God." I do not know if I have ever seen the Risen Lord as clearly as I did at that moment. He stood among us teaching us that love, understanding and sharing matter most. Who we are does not depend upon what we have. What we have can all too often get in the way of seeing who we truly are. These children gave us the gift of God's love. All of us need love, appreciation and understanding. We went to Brazil only to find Jesus ahead of us in the songs and smiles of children.

The resurrection changes everything. The Risen Lord brings forgiveness, healing, and new life to us. So often we think of the resurrection of Jesus as putting the broken pieces of his life back together as we would repair a shattered china cup or set a broken knee. There are some things that cannot be mended. They can only be made new. The Jesus who rises from the grave is a transformed Jesus. He is the same; yet he is different. He does not come back to live with his followers as he once did. He comes back to teach us how to live as he now lives. Jesus meets us as the power of forgiveness and in the power of love. When we cannot undo the past or make things right, we can forgive and we can begin again. The resurrection is about receiving a whole new life through the power of forgiveness.

Sister Helen Prejean is a Catholic nun whose order works in the poor and troubled St. Thomas housing project in New Orleans. In 1982, everything changed. Sister Helen became the pen pal of a man on Louisiana's death row. The man was Patrick Sonnier, who along with his brother, Eddie, kidnapped a high school couple from Lovers Lane, brutalized the girl, and killed them both. Their crime was senseless, barbaric and horrible.

Sister Helen had never known anyone or visited anyone on death row. She was afraid of this new experience. She began a twenty-year journey into a dark world of pain, death, hatred and fear. All along the way, she found that Jesus was present with the families of victims, troubled guards, imperfect laws, and frightened but tough death row inmates. She began to be a force for healing. She began to help death row inmates seek reconciliation, ask forgiveness and die with peace, even as she battled the injustices of our system of capital punishment. She worked to support the rights of victims and their families. All the while she discovered at every turn and in each new situation the Christ who is ahead of her.

She led Patrick to say at his execution to the father of the boy he killed, "Mr. LeBlanc, I don't want to leave this world with any hatred in my heart. I want to ask your forgiveness for what me and Eddie done, but Eddie done it" (p. 93, *Dead Man Walking*). Some years later she knelt in prayer with Mr. LeBlanc in a small Catholic church. As she prayed the rosary, Sister Helen thought, "Holding a rosary is a physical, tangible act - you touch and hold the small smooth beads awhile and then let go. 'Do not cling to me,' Jesus said to Mary Magdalene. The great secret: To hold

on, let go. Nothing is solid. Everything moves. Except love – hold on to love. Do what love requires” (p. 244).

Several years ago, I heard Sister Helen speak. At the end of the talk, I bought a copy of her book. I did not know until some time later when I read her book that she had inscribed the front with the words, “Choose life.”

Nothing is solid. Everything moves. Except love – hold on to love.

As people of faith, we stand between what has been and what is coming to be. Sometimes we grieve over the past and we weep over what we have lost. Our grief can keep us from seeing what God is doing among us. All of us have different ways of facing the future. The unknown both terrifies and excites. Sometimes we rush headlong into the future God has planned for us. Sometimes God has to pry our hands loose from the past. Sometimes we embrace the new with excitement; at other times, we just can't seem to let go of our past hurts or roll away our hearts of stone.

Christ is risen! The great, glorious news of the resurrection means that you and I are not bound by the broken dreams and shattered promises of the past, but that we may choose life! We keep our eyes on the Risen Jesus who is among us and before us. Our calling is to follow Jesus into the future with courage and faith: to choose life, to demonstrate forgiveness, to practice love. As Sister Helen said, “Nothing is solid. Everything moves. Except love – hold on to love. Do what love requires.”