

The Power of the Resurrection of Jesus is God Alive in the World

Sermon preached at St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, April 1, 2018

The Feast of the Resurrection of our Lord: Easter Sunday

*Mark 16:1-8: When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint Jesus. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

*1 Corinthians 15:1-11: I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you--unless you have come to believe in vain.*

*For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them--though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.*

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

How many of you have read "self-help" books? Bookstores have huge sections devoted to Self-Help and Self-Improvement. I wonder, however, what is the average shelf-life of a self-help book? They don't seem to last long. How many of you under the age of 40 have heard of a book called "The Road Less Traveled?" I'm not talking about the poem but the self-help book. It was a huge bestseller in the 1980s. Or how about the Scarsdale Diet? Isn't everyone doing the Scarsdale Diet?

No, of course the Scarsdale Diet was replaced by the low fat diets of the 1990s, and they were replaced by the high fat diets of the 2000s, and last year's diets will be replaced by new diets next year. Self-help is a cycling business that seeks to feed the need that we find in ourselves to do better, be different, or solve that nagging sense that we are in some way incomplete. Diets and self-help fads hit the scene with a splash, but they soon fizzle when the next trend comes along.

The same thing happened in the ancient world. The teachers of Athens shifted in popularity from one school of thought to another. Political leaders came and went. In Judea and Galilee, great Rabbis gathered large followings—don't you remember them? Gamaliel and Hillel and Shamai? No? How about Jews who tried to take Israel back to greatness by leading armed rebellion against Rome? You don't remember them? One by one, they all lived and died, many of them

executed by the Roman Empire, dropped into nameless graves and forgotten, their dreams and teachings along with them. Even the Roman Empire itself passed away.

But there was one rabbi who was not forgotten. He also gathered followers who loved to hear him teach. Many flocked to him because they thought he would be the one to kick out the Romans and bring Israel back to greatness. And he also was killed by the Romans, and his followers scattered, locking themselves behind closed doors in fear.

But then something changed. Shortly after his execution, his followers were out in the street—not at all afraid that they might be next for execution. They preached boldly the Good News of their teacher and quickly formed a community that changed lives, even though they were persecuted by both Jews and Romans. What happened to them? The center of their preaching was not just the death of their master (something strange enough), but more so the news that he was raised from the dead. They proclaimed that Jesus is risen from the dead, alive and offering eternal life to all who would follow him.

No mere inspirational story motivated them. No sentimentality started a new culture that would remake the Roman Empire from the inside. These men and women put their lives on the line and changed the lives of others because their experience was true—they had seen the Lord risen from the dead and they knew that God was breaking into the world in a new way.

The earliest written record that we have of the resurrection is from Paul's letter to the church in Corinth that we heard today. He gives the basic facts of the resurrection and lists the various people who had met Jesus alive from the dead—people that were still alive to corroborate each other's testimony. This is not the power of a made-up story—the world is full of stories. This is not the power of an idea—the world is full of ideas. This is the power of God come to us in the flesh. This is the power of God over human evil and over death itself. The resurrection is the power of God alive in the world.

Sooner or later, self-help books and self-help ideas run their course. When you want something true and real in life, you want something that will stand the test of time. But even the great philosophies and religions of the world are men and women speculating about the nature of God or speculating about the nature of spirituality or speculating about human nature. But in Jesus Christ, God comes to us. This isn't speculation, this is revelation. We aren't speculating about God, rather, God revealed himself to us.

The resurrection of Jesus shows us that we are dealing with something new, something different. The resurrection is part of the way we know that Jesus is the son of God—God in human flesh. The resurrection shows Jesus' victory over death, the first gift of new life that Jesus gives us. The resurrection is a unique point in human history that shows us that a power greater than ourselves loves us and offers us life—a life even greater than death. The resurrection is the power of God alive in the world.

We see this power alive not just in a religious movement from 2000 years ago, and not just in the way that the Church spread and thrives today. We see the power of the resurrection changing the lives of people today.

This week, we will mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the murder of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Last week, Elisa and I gathered with other clergy at the King Center in Atlanta. We read on the walls of the memorial the principles that guided Dr. King's work. Too many people of all backgrounds have forgotten the basis of Dr. King's work. Nonviolence was his method, but that method and its goal were rooted in the Good News of Jesus Christ. Dr. King's work was not just about liberation but also about reconciliation. He called us to transform our enemies by loving them, even loving them sacrificially, as Jesus loved us.

The power of Dr. King's work was more than his political wisdom. The power that was the foundation of his movement came from the love of Jesus Christ and the power of his resurrection. Fifty years later, Dr. King's efforts to embody the love of Christ still make a difference. Fifty years later, we would still do well to remember Jesus' call to sacrificial love and reconciliation that was at the heart of Dr. King's vision. The resurrection of Jesus is the power of God alive in the world, reconciling us to God and to each other in Christ.

Closer to home, apart from the great movements that have shaped us, we see the power of Jesus' resurrection at work in this parish. Stephen Philips was a member of this congregation for many years before his death in 2016. When Stephen first came to this church, he was suffering through a great deal of difficulty. He was dealing with a divorce, a job loss, and a cancer diagnosis. These would normally be sources of despair. But the power of the resurrection is the power of God to overcome despair.

Here, in this community, Stephen found the grace of Jesus through the men of the Brotherhood of St. Andrew. Here he learned to pray again, and to trust God in all these challenges. The power of God at work in him revived him and brought out of him a passion to serve both in the church and in the world. Stephen became a vital driving force for ministry in this place. All this came about not through a self-help program, and not even from good friends, though they played an important role. Stephen's renewal came from the power of the resurrection of Jesus—the power of God alive in the world and in his life to answer despair with hope and joy.

I spoke with another man recently who shared with me that he spent time in prison years ago. A prison sentence is not an easy journey—no one would want it for themselves. And yet, this man credits his time in prison as crucial to his being alive today. I can't imagine how difficult prison was, and many prisoners harden their hearts and dig in their heels. But for this man, the horrors of prison became the fertile ground of a change for him.

His former life was destructive to others and to himself. He was in what would seem to us like a dead end. And yet, God comes to dead end places to find us and call us back to him. My friend's life changed in his surrender to God, embracing the mercy of God and allowing God to renew and restore him to a life of joy and service to others. The power of the resurrection of Jesus is the power of God alive in the world, delivering us from the grip of our failures, and giving us new life.

This power of Jesus is real in this world, more powerful than a self-help fad. Jesus Christ comes to you and invites you to share in this new life. Come investigate for yourself and find the truth

of Jesus. Come engage in a life of prayer and study each day. Join with others in this Christian Community who seek and find God together. Come learn to take those blessings into the world to serve the needs of others, and to watch the power of God alive in their lives.

This is the vision God has for the Christian Community of the church. This is the power of God alive in your life and alive in the world. This is the source of joy and thanksgiving that gathers us today and fills this place with flowers and music and rejoicing. This is the power of God alive in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead!

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!