

Easter Sunday— Kevin Thew Forrester [03.23.08]

Readings from Jeremiah 31:1-6, Acts 10:34-43 and Matthew 28:1-10

The words in Matthew's gospel, "Be not afraid, do not be afraid," the most often quoted words in scripture—be not afraid—and in today's story it is: be not afraid of resurrection. Don't be afraid to experience resurrection. And you wonder what that's about. Is there courage that is involved in experiencing resurrection? There is. Today we celebrate, not a fairy tale, we celebrate something that is utterly real, thoroughly practical, and it's here and it's now. And we are afraid of it. That's what Matthew is telling us. Do you know anyone in your life who has been resurrected? Do you know resurrection? I've been thinking about perhaps my closest friend back in Oregon. A friend of Rise and I, and his wife is a friend of ours as well. He's one of those friends who has become an old friend, which makes him many ways a dear friend. And so, when there is tragedy, it breaks the heart even more. And we need to talk about tragedy and mix it in today with resurrection because it keeps us grounded, what we're talking about today.

Now, it was a number of years ago, just after we had moved here, I got a call, Rise and I received a call, from my dear friend's spouse, and said things were falling apart. And these are friends that we would get together like done today, and after Easter would go out and have a nice meal and share a glass of wine, or, Oregon has lots of great brew pubs, we'd have a good beer, and we'd share our stories. We were all very tired, they were in choir, she was in Altar Guild, many good, fond memories, of spending time with food and wine together. And she said "He needs to go into treatment. Things are falling apart and he needs to go into treatment." And, uh, it took me by surprise. And she said "He needs your support" and would I sponsor him? We are friends, we had been friends, and I had worked in treatment going through college, too, so I said "Sure." And I remember calling him when I was back east when he was in treatment, and writing him a letter to encourage him to go through. And he did, and he completed the treatment and he came out, and it was great... For two months... two months which kind of made it all the more painful for his wife to have that man back in a new way for two months and then he was gone again. And another phone call came... And another treatment ensued... A longer treatment this time. Then he got out and it lasted about four months this time.

Jeremiah says this morning that in everlasting love I conceived you. Those are the words of God in Jeremiah this morning. "In everlasting love I have conceived you." In the early church, those words along with other words we find in the Hebrew scriptures led us to realize that we have been created in the image of God. That is our essence, we are created in the image of God. We are anointed as God's own, that's how we have come into being. And yet, what goes wrong? What goes wrong? Because all of us, bit by bit, lose

touch with essentially who we are. The God who is the center of the center of the center of our being—we lose touch with that. The church had a teaching about that that got so distorted. Remember the teaching of original sin? And we came to associate it with the fall of Adam and Eve..., almost a children's story about an apple in the garden. But the truth that we're trying to get at with that ancient teaching of original sin is that each of us are born, each of us is conceived, in everlasting love, and we lose it. We lose sense, our sense that God is our core. We lose sense that we can taste God with every breath we take. We lose the sense that we can feel God in our bones. And for human beings, if we are indeed created in the image of God, to no longer be able to taste God, and to feel God, and to know God with every breath we take, it creates a hole in us. The ancients said it creates a wound in us. And that wound is intolerable for us, 'cause we are created to know God. We are created to love God, to receive God, and when God isn't there, or at least we know longer taste God, that creates a hole in us, it creates a wound in us. And it creates a wound in each and every one of us.

And it's no use talking about who's to blame, that's a dead end. We're all in it together. We all have the hole, we all know the hole; we all have the wound; it's with us all. And what we begin to do, like my friend in Oregon, because we find that wound so painful we begin to look for ways to fill it in. You know, we know alcohol is an addiction, but there lots of addictions, some that our society likes better than others. One that our society likes and fosters is, well, you know, if I can't taste God in my heart and my soul, you know, what I will begin to do is, I will be a very successful human being. I will be a success in my business; I'll be a success in school. And I begin to identify with that, that's who I am, I am Kevin, I am the success, and the pain doesn't seem quite so searing, the chasm doesn't seem quite so wide and deep if I can say "No, this is who I am and you'll like me because I'm this type of person."

It's a lot of words, isn't it?[laugh] (??? We could all use a little binkie. ???) And some of us: "well I'll be unique and that'll get me through life. Everyone will know me as someone who stands out, and that's how I'll get the attention. You'll love me because I'm not like anyone else." And then the pain and the fear isn't quite as deep, and I can tolerate it. And so what happens, we begin to accrue these things, these identifications: "I'm this. I'm that. I'm this. I'm that" And then we don't feel the wound so much any more. We can make it through life.

There was a fourth century monk who I refer to every once in a while, his name is Evagrius, and he could have been a good twentieth century psychologist. Not quite the twenty-first century, but the twentieth century he'd be okay. And he had an amazing capacity to describe what I'm talking about. And even if we feel sad sometimes, we like feeling sad. We like feeling melancholy or I like to have a little anger; I like feeling angry with people who've done me wrong, it feels kind of righteous, kind of good. And Evagrius had these two descriptions, let me read them to you. This is about

387, 388, a long time ago, which makes this all the more remarkable, and he'll use this word demon, that these things we identify with, these passions and these thoughts that we have of ourselves, they're demons, in the sense they destroy us, they eat us up. And he's talking to a bunch of monks here, but it also can refer to us. And he has this to say about the experience of sadness that many of us cultivate. He says "sadness tends to come up at times because of the deprivation of one's desires. On other occasions it accompanies anger. When it arises from the deprivation of desires, it takes the place in the following manner...." Now here he is describing this: "certain thoughts first drive the soul to memory of home and parents." In other words, wasn't it nice when we were growing up? Remember the good old days? Remember the way the church used to be? I grew up in Latin... oh, the good old days. Well, you remember before we had obligations as a parent? Just going off and doing whatever you want? That's what he's talking about, very practical here. We've begun to long for a time when we thought "that's when I was free. That's when I was happy." He said: "Certain thoughts first drive the soul to the memory of home and parents, or else to that of one's former life. Now when these thoughts find the soul offers no resistance, but rather follows them, and pours itself out in them, in these pleasures that are only in the head, they seize and drench her with sadness." They seize our soul and drench us with sadness, and we'd like to live there. I'm the sad person. I'm the one who feels life to its core.

And then he went on to talk about one other one, anger. He says: "The most fierce passion is anger. In fact its boiling and stirring up of wrath against another who's given injury, or at least we thought they injured us." I think Jackie did something to me. "And it constantly irritates the soul, and above all at the time of prayer it seizes the mind." Don't you like that? I'm just trying to be quiet here, and somehow you get in my mind, and I can't... it's like a... I can't get you out. I get obsessed with you, and I walk out in the woods, or I'm out skiing on a day like today, and I think it's going to be great down by Lake Superior on Presque Isle, and there you are, by God you popped into my head, and I can't get you out of my mind. That's an addiction. I cannot not think about you, and when I do you tick me off.

This is very real stuff here. These demons, they just drive us into a hole. And he said "then there comes a time when it persists longer and it becomes indignation, and it comes to us at night like demons." Isn't that the case? We can't even sleep without this person getting into our minds.

These passions we have, these thoughts we have that try to fill up this hole, you know, they come in to us bit by bit like these sands, and after a while they get like sediment, and then, after the years, that sediment is hard, and that sediment becomes a stone, and that stone encases us in our own tomb of our own wound. That's what Matthew is talking about here, we bury ourselves alive in our own tomb. And that stone, with all those identifications we've made in life, sits on our heart, and it buries us. And we wonder: how can that stone ever get off my heart? How can that stone ever

get off my mind? I want to be free! I want to be free. I want to taste freedom.

And Jesus reveals to us the path of freedom. And it's a marvelous path; it's kind of an ironic path because it begins in the desert with Jesus. Lent and Easter are this in our lives, not just during the season, but every day, Lent and Easter are like this in our lives. Every day is dying and rising. Jesus was baptized, he's the beloved, and what's the first thing we see happening in Lent? He goes into the desert, and what happens is that Jesus in the desert, He begins to have these thoughts. We talk about it in terms of the devil, but there're these thoughts that are coming up in His heart. And what are, there are three thoughts that are coming up in Jesus' head. He's out there in the desert, and He has this thought, you know, maybe what this is all about, being beloved, is maybe, just maybe, I am called to be the miracle worker beyond all miracle workers. Maybe that's who I am.

But He says no, that's not it. And then He has another thought. He says "maybe, I'm the type of leader that people are going to wait on me, hand and foot. That's the other temptation. And He thinks about it, and He talks there for a while and he says, "No, that's not it." And then the third one comes, and it says "No, you're going to be King of Kings, just like Caesar only bigger." And He says, "No. That's not it either."

What is utterly remarkable about those desert stories is we tend to do two things in our lives when we have those thoughts or feelings. On the one hand, we say "Oh, I'm a good person. I don't have those types of thoughts or feelings. That never comes up to me." And so, we suppress it. Or on the other hand, we just give in to it. "Yep, I am that, I am totally that." And Jesus does neither one. He doesn't suppress it; He doesn't live into it. He looks at it; He talks with it in the desert. Here's a man in the desert talking to His own passions, and He says, "You know, I am none of those things. I will not identify with any of those things. I am the beloved. I am the beloved." And resurrection begins to happen. And it takes Him to the only place it can take him, and it takes Him to the place we will all meet one day when we are on our death bed. It takes Him to letting go of His body.

There is one thing every human being identifies with. Some of us may not identify with power, or being unique, or beautiful, or smart, but we all identify with this body. And it is a lovely body, isn't it? This body we have, this is a lovely body. And the cross is all about giving up this body. It's all about giving up the taste of our lover's kiss on our lips. That is a real loss. It is all about letting go of the hand of a child and yours and mine. That is a real loss. And Jesus says "I will give that up because I love you, and because I love my God, the beloved." And as He dies on the cross He is resurrected. He is resurrected. He is a new man. He is a new human being.

The Greek Orthodox say that the entire Christian journey is this, we are born in the image of God and we are called to become the very likeness of God.

Jesus reveals to us the path of every human being. We are called into rebirth, into resurrection, to be the very likeness of God. And my friend, after his third try in treatment has now been sober for several years. This is real. He has a marriage again. He is alive again. He is the very likeness of God. And the stone, which was crushing him in life, is gone. It is broken. It is not simply rolled away, it is shattered. And that is rebirth, and that is resurrection. You and me, we are called in the footsteps of Jesus to go from the image of God to the very likeness of God.

Today, we are going to baptize Harrison. (I want you to begin to come forward). We are going to baptize Harrison, and the beautiful thing about Harrison is that this morning we are not making him, we are not making you Harrison—he's not responding to Harrison because it's actually Harry, very formal our baptisms—but we're not making him into the image of God today. "I have conceived you in an everlasting way in love" we are told in Jeremiah. He is the image of God. That's who every child is. What we do this morning as we welcome you into this household of God, your blue eyes and all, we pledge to stand with him, whether he is physically here or here in spirit and prayer, because there will come a time when Harrison loses touch with the fact that he is the image of God. And he will need our prayers. He will need the support of you, the godparents, and the parents, and sister, and grandparents. We come here because, as the household of God, we give each other support so that we might indeed taste the very likeness of God as the center of the center of our being. And so we welcome him into this community to carry him when he cannot carry himself. And so, let us proceed with the baptism.