

Resurrection Day 2020
Sermon 4.12.20

Colossians 3:1-4

If, therefore, you were raised together with the Anointed, seek the things above, where the Anointed is sitting at God's right hand; Set your mind on the things above, not the things on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with the Anointed in God; When the Anointed, our life, is made manifest, then you too will be made manifest along with him in glory.

Matthew 28:1-10

But after the Sabbath, at the dawn of the first day of the Sabbath-week, Mary the Magdalene and the other Mary came to view the tomb. And look: A great earthquake occurred, for an angel of the Lord, descended from the sky and coming forward, rolled away the stone and sat upon it. And his appearance was like lightning, and his raiment was white as snow. And those who were standing guard were shaken by terror at him and became as dead men. And speaking out the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who has been crucified; He is not here; for he was raised, just as he said; come see the place where he lay. And go quickly, tell his disciples that he was raised from the dead; and look: He precedes you into Galilee, where you will see him. See, I have told you."

And, quickly departing from the tomb with fear and great joy, they ran to announce it to the disciples. And look: Jesus met them, saying, "Greetings." And, approaching, they took hold of his feet and prostrated themselves before him. Then Jesus says to them, "Do not be afraid; go announce to my brothers that they should depart into Galilee, and there they will see me."

And as they were going, look: Some of the guard, going into the city, reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. And, having met with the elders and taking counsel together, they gave the soldiers a good quantity of silver, Saying, "Say that 'His disciples, coming by night, stole him while we were sleeping.' And if this is heard by the governor we shall prevail upon him and see to it that you are free from trouble. And taking the silver they did as they were instructed...But the eleven disciples went into Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus appointed them. And seeing him they prostrated themselves; but some doubted.

Happy Resurrection Day, everyone—or maybe not happy. I'm saying this to a camera instead of a congregation, so it is in any event strange, maybe even scary. We all read the news.

Resurgence is the latest worry.

As we've given ourselves this grand time-out—which has given some of us nothing but time to imagine more deeply the state that we're in, each of us sheltering in place (and some of those places more hospitable than others, some less so, less conducive to human thriving, lonelier or more tedious, harsher or more demanding, more pressing, more cramped, more abusive of the

human spirit), though a few of us out there where what shelter there is from what we need shelter from is only hardly to be found (can you spare mask, a guarding gown, latex gloves?)—what there’s to worry about now is resurgence.

The virus came, and showed up in more and more places, among more and more people. So, we locked down and timed out.

And now we keep our distance from one another, grocery store lines where the mild anxiety of waiting in line (“I’m next”) gets spread out across a distance of six feet (“The line starts back here.”) This complicates things, but also eases things. (“We’re all in this together,” you nod across the distance. “We’re on the same team. And what’s the rush?” you ask, trying to get a laugh, until someone in nursing scrubs takes the place at the end of the line. “Maybe you’re in a rush,” you concede.) And Times Square is empty. And windows of shops along Main Streets everywhere are dark. And the sky over Los Angeles is clear of smog. And the bears, now themselves come out from hibernation, have their way with Yellowstone Park. And my neighborhood fox is just now walking down New Lenox Road, right in the middle.

And it’s showing signs of abating, this virus. It’s showing signs of having fewer hosts to jump from and to. Found in one zoo tiger, found in wastewater, found on the surfaces of cruise ships and supermarkets, it’s becoming dormant as we are—or so we hope.

We’re like squirrels that stop in the middle of the road as the oncoming car bears down—as if this makes safe from predatory danger. And sometimes it does. Sometimes that car stops, that driver waits. “Go about your business, Squirrel.”

So, what there is to worry about now is resurgence. (Influenza had the highest death toll during its second winter of its three-year run.) Once we’ve sheltered in place and flattened the curve and even abated the spread, we wait until it seems safe to come out, until comes that call as from childhood, “Olly olly oxen free!” That hollered release from when, as a kid, you were yet hidden in your place, someone seeking you (a friend, a kid from your neighborhood who you sought out when you were bored, that jeans-and-sneakers go-to, and who is just now a threat, the tag from whom would be your gamely death) until came the call, “Olly olly oxen free!” (It’s a derivation of this, “All ye, all ye outs, in free,” which became, inexplicably, “Olly olly oxen free,” but then, in need of making sense, became, “Olly olly in come free,” though for us now should be “All ye, all ye in: out free!”): wait for it.

Wait for it.

What will it actually sound like?

Will it be Trump's voice, or Dr. Fauci's? Or will it be Surgeon General Adams' voice?

Whose voice will be authoritative here? (Olly olly in: out free!)

But then there's the possibility of resurgence.

Actually, then there's the *likelihood* of resurgence.

This could be a problem that won't go away—at least not until we have a vaccine.

Resurgence: this is the closest English word to Resurrection.

Jesus was a problem that wouldn't go away.

So, is this good news, you wonder?

Yes: because consider for whom he was a problem.

The powers and principalities long had converged. The powers of religion, the principalities now of empire: they long had converged, and ever shall do, creating the sort of domination systems that keep everything orderly. The trains run on time. There's only rarely a shortage of bread. And they had tried, this then convergence of Roman imperial authorities and Temple priestly authorities, tried to tamp down this one who somehow (somehow!) manifest God's eternal realm wherever he went—God's deathless, fearless, gracious realm, shown up here, shown up there, begun in Galilee and from there spread out, then to end up in Jerusalem, in the Temple court where was exercised imperial "justice," then outside the city gate at Golgotha where lifted high to die a cross. They'd tried to tamp it down because it was in defiance of everything that held the world together.

Social order: it comes at some cost, but it's a small one.

It's fine.

So, the emperor required obeisance, absolute, unquestioning obeisance: it's fine.

So, the empire took over lands for plunder—because that's what empires do. Land for producing wealth performed by the slave labor that came of the captured people. And all this would be funneled upward, from rural to urban, from peasant to king to imperial courts to emperor at the tippy-top. But, look, he had put in place, in all these varied locales, governors, "client-rulers" chosen from among the local people, so to have their trust and maybe even

affection, though while set to task of imperial purpose. And so they'd have set about that task—these client-rulers, and in the case of Judea the High Priest and the elders and the scribes.

Now they were between a rock and a hard place, trying to do enough right by the people to keep their loyalty, but enough right by Rome to keep their heads—collect wealth from the people to pay tribute to the emperor. And maybe it was a bit of thrill, to some anyway. This walk along a razor's edge, this playing both sides for your own survival: Caiaphas was better at it than most. Biblical scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan draw the full picture in their book *The Last Week*, which I spent this last week reading.

Subtitled, *What the Gospels Really Teach Us about Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem*, it explains, “The high priest and the temple authorities had a difficult task. As with the client-rulers before them, their primary obligation to Rome was loyalty and collaboration. They were to make sure that the annual tribute to Rome was paid. They were also to maintain domestic peace and order. Rome did not want rebellions. Their role was to be the intermediaries between a local domination system and an imperial domination system.”

For all this, then “...it is easy to imagine a responsible official saying, as the high priest Caiaphas is reported to have said, ‘It is better to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.’” This calculation finds justification two verses earlier in John's gospel narrative, Caiaphas saying to the temple priests: “If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.”

He wasn't wrong. They would in fact do that—just not yet. Fifty years hence, though, Rome would do just that, and because of an insurrection that the Jews (and Jewish Christians) undertook. Rome, under Nero and eventually under Vespasian, would come in and destroy the holy site, the city, and in some important ways the nation. It would all be left in effortful, laborious, hard-won ruin. You have to work hard to take down a building like the Temple. Absent a wrecking ball or a bomb, you have to be really *committed*.

Insurrections: these can be a problem, but you can make them go away. You just have to stomp hard enough.

So, this trick, this delicate balancing act: Caiaphas was better at it than most. “There were eighteen high priests,” Borg and Crossan explain, “from the time Rome shifted local rule from Archelaus (an outsider to Judea) to the temple hierarchy...,” eighteen high priests from the year 6

to the outbreak of the great revolt in 66. Over those sixty years, then, and that high turnover of high priests, Caiaphas served and ruled for the longest—eighteen years.

Served and ruled: served the empire and ruled his own people: he must have been a better-than-average politician.

Maybe he found it all a thrilling challenge. With stakes so high yet also every day, maybe this wasn't the sort of thing that kept him up at night but was the thrilling reason for getting up in the morning. I *can't* relate. Eighteen years of that sounds like hell to me. So, I can't imagine what Caiaphas might have felt when word reached him that Jesus was yet a resurgent problem.

“Resurrection! Who'd have thought?”

So, now this Jesus would continue to have the people see what the people were not to see.

Huh, now this Jesus would continue in his previous work of laying bare before the people's eyes what lies they were told that they might be blind.

Lies like this: it's just the way the world is—exploitative, dominating, quelling of what would mean (foolishly, foolishly) to rise up. (Love!)

Lies like this: that this is just the way things are—quashing of what truth would otherwise persist, suppressing what would otherwise insist upon itself. (Love!)

This is just the way things are so get used to it, get comfortable. Pay your tribute to Rome. Pay your obeisance to the king. Pay your attention (your precious attention!) to nonsense, to deception, to spectacle and distraction, to bread and circus, to rallies and social media. Surrender your powerful imagination to the things of this world—the givens, the forgone conclusions, the *fait accompli*, the fatalistic “way things are and thus ever shall be.” Submit your high hopes to things that fall within the horizon of the given—some new shoes, maybe, or a bigger house than your neighbor's next door, or a better-paying job than the others of your graduation class now have, a leg up in life. Maybe in your next house you'll have clean running water. Maybe in your next life you'll lighter skin, a healthier body. Maybe by the end of next month you'll have enough money for food. But let's not get carried away. Don't go thinking things will ever change.

It is what it is.

“But, look,” Jesus said, if not in word, then certainly in deed.

“But, *look*,” the gospel says—and over and over again today.

They'd come this dawn, these two women, these to Mary's. They'd come just as light was spreading, just as sight was returning to plain. They'd come to *view* the tomb. And then, *look*: there was an earthquake. And then there *appeared* an angel whose *appearance* was like lightening. And the angel noted that the women had come to *seek* Jesus, but they were to come *see* where Jesus had lay and was no longer, because, *look*, he'd gone ahead them to Galilee.

There they would *see* him.

And this is an important point because it continues in a theme that's been throughout Jesus' life, but makes its implications even more profound: over and over again Jesus is remembered to have gone ahead of his disciples.

What's more, in the couple of instances where the disciples go ahead of him, it's a sign of trouble. When Jesus heard word of his cousin John's assassination and so stayed behind on the mountain to pray, he sent the disciples on ahead. But then they got caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee and needed rescue from him, as if nature itself recognized this as out of line. Similarly, when Peter rebuked Jesus for Jesus indicating that he would be handed over to the powers and principalities to be crucified (rebuked him by saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!") Jesus rebuked Peter in return, saying, strangely, "Get behind me, Satan!" And the word Satan is so provocative here that we might never have noticed the positioning Jesus was asserting in the rebuke: he is ever to go ahead of the disciples: they are never to go ahead of him, *we* are ever to let him go first.

He was ever to go ahead of them, and would still as of now, beginning that day at dawn.

He is ever to go ahead of us—and there we will see him, on the edge of dawn, just beyond that horizon.

See, he cuts a path through history.

Look: he makes a way through the world—this way, the *hodos* as it's called in the Greek of the gospel narratives. He makes a way in the world, and it is the *Way*—the *Way* of grace and peace, whose end is grace and peace. He makes a way and it is *the Way* of justice and restoration whose end is justice and restoration. The means are the end, and the end is good. The way is the aim, and the aim is true. This is the eschatological implication of the Resurrection; this is the implication about the end of history and the whole creation's at long last consummation into God's eternity, time consumed into eternity.

See, Jesus has gone ahead of us, has gone ahead of all that is, and now sits at the right of the Father at the end of all things, sits in glory and perfection and completion and salvation. He has gone ahead of us in this life through which we travel, made way for us that, at the end of all that is, there we shall see him. When we are gathered in, when we are warmly embraced and graciously made whole and all history, these wrecks of time, are redeemed for what promise they once held but fulfillment they never in time reached: there and then we shall see him, and with him we shall feast and then, rejoicing, we shall rest.

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Meanwhile, there's something funny about this, Matthew's version of the Resurrection. It's almost cute.

Matthew's version, as we've seen, features, as in Mark's version, the retelling of the promise that Jesus has gone ahead to Galilee. There the disciples would see him—in Galilee, where it all began, and where it would now begin again. And with each cycling through there would be a deepening of faith; with each cycling through the life and work once again of Jesus there would be increasing habituation, like a groove cut deeper and deeper with time. With enough practice, the world might indeed become perfect. With each rehearsal of this cycle, things might become a little more filled of God. But unlike in Mark's gospel, Matthew remembers also Jesus breaking in even prior to their arrival in Galilee—because, look, Jesus met them on their way. And whether it's on the way of the two Mary's to tell the other disciples, or on the way of all the disciples to Galilee isn't clear, but it doesn't matter because, look, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!"

Cute, because it's as if he couldn't wait.

He would meet them at the end, just as the angel had said (even saying, as if checking his work, "See, I have told you.) He would also, apparently, meet them on the way, which the angel didn't say because perhaps the angel didn't know. Maybe this was a change of plans. Maybe this was an improvisation on Jesus' part. Maybe he just couldn't wait. ("Are we there yet?")

He would meet them at the end, and he would meet them on the way.

He will meet us at the end, and he will meet us on the way.

He will meet us along the Way: we just have to look for him. We just have to see—resurrection, resurgence, of mercy and justice, of disruptive love.

Of course, the powers and principalities will continue to attempt to tamp that out, will as ever pursue their policy of stomping and silencing. “Don’t believe your lying eyes,” they will say when we see the presence of the Lord, the persistence of love, the insistence that God’s grace is the greater and truer way. “Don’t believe what you see as far as the beauty of humanity, the resilience of compassion, the touching movement of love. Believe what we tell you,” is what the world will tell us. And they’ve done the math, the powers and principalities. They’ve figured it out. And your wild dreams of love and justice? Well, that’s just not going to work out, not at this time. But here’s some bread, and over there’s a circus, and here come some Gladiators ready for spectacle and spoiling for fight, or some Real Housewives ready to scrap over someone’s rough-hewn country house. That’ll be fun! You should be happy.

As for me, I’ve largely gotten over my pervasive sadness. The first week, I was sad. The second week, when what we’re now amidst was yet wedging itself in at the foundation of our lives, I was pervasively sad. Now I mostly only get sad at the prospect that we might miss this whole crisis as the opportunity it could also be. That is, if it’s in fact true that God is at work in all things for good, if it’s in fact the case, as Soren Kierkegaard claimed it was that case, that Christ presents himself as one of the choices we might choose whenever we have a choice to make. Whenever it’s stated as the aim that we all get back to life as normal, and as soon as possible, I feel a deflating sense of sorrow.

See, I wasn’t necessarily in love with “life as normal.” This, for all the familiar reasons—racism, poverty, environmental devastation. This crisis, though, has laid bare anew some of the structural sin in we’d gotten used to along the way. In a series of articles forthcoming in the *New York Times*, op-ed writers will present “The America We Need.” Its introduction by the Editorial Board covers a lot of ground: “The present crisis has revealed the United States as a nation in which professional basketball players could be rapidly tested for the coronavirus but health care workers were turned away; in which the affluent could retreat to the safety of second homes, relying on workers who can’t take paid sick leave to deliver food; in which children in lower-income households struggle to connect to the digital classrooms where their school lessons are now supposed to be delivered... It is a nation in which local officials issuing stay-at-home orders must reckon with the cruel irony that hundreds of thousands of Americans do not have homes... It

is a nation in which enduring racial inequalities, in wealth and in health, are reflected in the pandemic's death toll...

“But already some are asserting that the extraordinary nature of the crisis does not warrant permanent changes in the social contract.”

The Editorial Board seems to disagree: “This misapprehends both the nature of crises in general and the particulars of the present emergency. The magnitude of a crisis is determined not just by the impact of the precipitating events but also by the fragility of the system it attacks... This nation was ailing long before the coronavirus reached its shores.”

I can see that.

Here's where I diverge from that: much as I love America, I come at the sorrowing of this crisis as a Christian, as a child of the dawn that is yet spreading. I don't long just for America to be America again, though it was never the America it is promised to strive to be. I long for all this in the spreading wake of the Resurrection, this thing to which we are to wake up this morning.

The Resurrection is God's “Yes” to Jesus and to the Jesus Way; it is God's “No” to the domination systems that define so much of our lives, that grab after, claw after so much of the human story, which largely is the creation's story. The Resurrection is God's “Yes” to Jesus now resurgent throughout history. Love that sneaks its way in through the cracks. Mercy that spreads like dandelion seeds which children blow across lawns 'cuz they don't know better. Justice that finds foothold in history because those who've long suffered injustice glimpse the truth of their rightful place also at God's right hand and won't just lay back any longer.

Of course, of course, what might resurge among us today—this virus, this *virus*—isn't such good news, is, in many ways, tragic news. I know that. But we do face a choice, we of this whole world; and it is as ever a choice in which Christ is one of our options.

God is yet with us. The Gospel yet calls us. Christ is resurgent in our midst, having arrived at the end where he awaits our also arrival, though also meeting us along the way that we might have hope.

Look for him, then, you Easter people. Look, and see Christ wherever he comes to play. It's everywhere. It's *everywhere!*

Thanks be to God.

