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Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster

Easter Sunrise Service, at the cornfield chapel

(Adorers of the Blood of Christ, Columbia PA)

Resurrection: Hope for the Undoing

(slightly adapted version of the same sermon was given at the 10:00 a.m. Easter worship service at CMCL)

So, here we are! Watching the sunrise on the 2,000th (ok, give or take) annual remembrance and celebration of Easter ... the day that the tomb of Jesus Christ was found empty, the day that hints and imaginings of *resurrection* were first whispered.

We stand here this Easter on ground that is sacred for so many reasons: Sacred because it is the home of the sisters of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ; sacred because of the infusion of their faith and prayers into this soil and the faith-in-community that takes place here daily; sacred because of the wound that is now here, where the ground was torn and the soil displaced—penetrated without consent; sacred because of the protests and acts of protective love that have taken place here, the prayers and attention of so many who have never even been able to set foot here, but have been watching and reading with care and concern; sacred because of the tending it received for millennia at the hands of this country's first peoples—human caretakers who did not see it as property to be owned or subdued; and, darn it, sacred *without any need of human connection or context*—sacred because it is the earth, because it is both creation and extension of Creator; sacred because every square inch of this round earth is sacred.

We live in a time and a culture where value is always comparative – to argue that this particular piece of land is sacred, we feel the urge to prove that it is somehow *more* sacred than some other patch of earth. But value is not relative. To *be* is to be a part of existence, of creation, of the web of life.

Jesus Christ taught something similar: Over and over, he deflected special attention ... or perhaps rather, he *reflected* it instead of *absorbing* it. When I am gone, he would say, you will still find me among you – look around at those whom society does not value: there you will find me. Every being is to be treated with the respect that we treat the divine.

This Easter, as you all know, is also April Fool's Day, and it is easy to see the correlations! How foolish it is to believe in the power of love and life beyond death. But here we stand, on land that already houses the pipeline so many sought to prevent. Why are we still here? Are *we* fools? To love the land and seek to protect it is as foolish as parenthood – as they say, to become a parent is to put your own heart inside another being, and have to watch it walk away and out into the world with absolutely nothing you can do to protect it.

We may be fools, but we are in good company. Many who are now lauded for their wisdom, their courage, their vision, their love, were considered fools at the time when they spoke all the words that we trot out on Facebook, one cherry-picked sentence at a time and many were insulted, injured and even killed for their dangerous foolishness.

I am struck by the gospel of Mark's telling of Jesus' resurrection. It does not end with a sighting of Jesus, alive again. It ends with an empty tomb, the words of a stranger saying, "Don't be afraid, Jesus is risen." And with the women who loved Jesus (who were, by the way, the only followers who showed up) running away in terror and confusion.

Resurrection is not simple business. Seeds break down *in*, and then break forth *from*, the dark invisible underground.

Just as the followers of Jesus did not understand or know or believe what they had heard, even at a moment when it was, in fact, true ... perhaps we might be forgiven for not seeing the new life in our situations of disappointment and death even when the seeds of transformation are alive under our feet. We stand here with some disappointment and grief – although we stand on top of an empty pipeline, rather than at the mouth of an empty tomb. And yet ... here we stand, so we must be fools because we must still believe ...

We believe that *nothing* can make this ground any less sacred and beloved. We stand here because we stand in defiance of the many cultures in our world that practice the devaluing and abandonment of the female body, our own culture *not* excluded. The earth, so often described in feminine language, has been similarly objectified—adored with words, but used for pleasure and gain, and quickly abandoned and shamed when anyone other than the rightful “owner” dares to use her in the very same ways.

Hear these words of poet, pastor and writer of blessings, Jan Richardson, from her book *The Cure for Sorrow*, a book of blessings, many of which she wrote in the wake of the unexpected death of her husband (bracketed inclusions are my own):

I know how long
you have been waiting
for your story to take
a different turn,
how far
you have gone in search
of what will mend you [*this place?*]
and make you [*it?*] whole.

I bear no remedy,
no cure,
no miracle
for the easing
of your pain.

But I know
the medicine
that lives in a story
that has been
broken open.

I know
the healing that comes
in ceasing
to hide ourselves away
with fingers clutched
around the fragments
we think are
none but ours.

See how they fit together,
these shards
we have been carrying—
how in their meeting
they make a way
we could not find alone.

This year, as I have pondered what resurrection message there might be for us this Easter, I have been reading outside my own theological tradition. There is a story about Jesus that is known among Western Christian traditions, but is much more emphasized in the Eastern Church's understanding of Easter, which is the story (legend/imagining/Midrash?) of what Jesus was up to between Good Friday and Easter. These stories show up as much in images and frescoes and murals of the church over its first millennium than recorded words, but what they show is Jesus: coming down from the cross post-crucifixion, striding to the Gates of Hell, often portrayed with his wounds still intact, sometimes still carrying his cross, shoving aside the Gatekeeper of the Dead, and announcing his intent to liberate Death's prisoners. Not everyone is depicted as deciding to follow Jesus out of the realm of death, but he emerges with Adam and Eve, symbolic parents of humanity along with him, and looks out at the viewer, including whoever watches in this daring search and rescue.

According to scholar John Dominic Crossan, the difference in the Western and Eastern understandings of this, is that the Eastern Church understood the resurrection to be *communal*. Jesus did not pass through to the other side of death alone, but dove into the very place of past tense, the place where deeds have already been done, battles and lives and hopes and dreams lost. The hero doesn't arrive *in the nick of time* to save the damsel in distress; he retroactively *undoes* death and defeat.

In this story, the fight is never over, even when it's lost. This the story that can break us open (reaching back to Jan Richardson's words). This is the medicine that can bring us healing, that can give us the hope, the audacity, the *foolishness* to keep on doing the hard work of land-protection, of water-protection, of child protection, of protection of all people whose lives are in a permanent, institutionalized state of danger in our world. These things can be un-done.

The importance of protection of all that is sacred, prevention from harm cannot be over-stated. Yet what I find so powerful here is that there is even hope for un-doing.

I don't honestly know how this un-doing will happen—for the pipeline; for the earth we have rendered so critically ill; for the millions who have lived too brutally and died too early and too violently to build and maintain history's empires; for those living in occupied land, or in refugee camps; for the family and community of Stephon Clark in Sacramento; for survivors of every kind of abuse.

I don't honestly know what part we have to play, but if resurrection is communal, we, like Christ, must NEVER give up. We, like Christ, must leave NO ONE behind. The game is never over, for us to walk away, to walk off the field, *whether we hold rational hope or not*.

The heart labyrinth that was placed here, over the very seam of the wound in this land just last week on Palm Sunday, already proclaims it: Love will still win. Even here.

Resources:

Jan Richardson, "The Healing that Comes," *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief*. Wanton Gospeller Press, 2016. pp. 113-4.

John Dominic Crossan, "The Communal Resurrection of Jesus,"

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-dominic-crossan/the-communal-resurrection-jesus_b_847507.html