

Sermon for Thursday in Easter Week God is Breaking In – Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School April 24, 2014

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Luke 24:36b-48

It is an honor and joy to be here again in this place, with old friends and new.

And in particular on this week, and in this season. Although I confess that I found the assignment of preaching on Easter – the texts are all Easter these weeks – challenging. Why, I asked myself as I opened the Lectionary, is it difficult for me to find the hermeneutic here? Where is the allegory? Where are the politics? Palm Sunday is easy: riding into Jerusalem a donkey, speaking truth to power. Pentecost is easy: we'll get to that. But these texts on disappearing corpses and Messiahs rising from the dead and the forgiveness of sins – not so much. Also, Easter – historically — it's in the DNA – a difficult season for Jews.

As much as I respond powerfully to the ministry of Jesus and to the heart of the gospel message, I have been confused by Easter.

But as I read the texts – we'll only talk about Luke, but it's in Acts also, we just won't have time for Acts today — the more I realize that this confusion is an important, even essential part of the Easter experience. There is much talk about the time between Friday and Sunday – Holy Saturday as a time in between two huge events – the disaster has happened but the redemption is not yet, it is the day of darkness, of profound uncertainty, of fear – where was Jesus? Was he dead? What do we do on that day? Liturgically, it's relatively barren. And then on Easter it's all light and everything clears up. But that's not the way the story is told in the Gospels. Nothing clears up. The real confusion begins on Easter.

Let's go to the text – The last chapter of the third gospel, Luke chapter 24. We pick up the story at verse 36:

Jesus himself appeared and stood among the eleven and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?"

They thought they had seen a ghost. Let's go back to the very beginning of the chapter. It's dawn on Sunday. The women returned to the tomb, rolled away the stone — no body. "**Perplexed**," is the word – the Greek can be better rendered "bewildered" – completely thrown off. Then these two gleaming men (who were these guys??) appear, and again, **terrified** is the word used to describe the women. And they are chastised for their utter failure to understand what had happened. "*Why are you looking for the living among the dead?*" And then the encounter on the road to Emmaus. It's the same story. "*How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe*" are the words describing the two apostles who met Jesus. I like to describe the apostles as perpetually *clueless*. The time after Easter, right through to Pentecost, was a time of confusion. Jesus' followers were stunned, muddled, befuddled. They didn't understand what was going on, what it all meant.

Jesus, as always, patiently works with his loving but clueless followers. He shows them the simple, down to earth truth. Back to the text:

*Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were **disbelieving and still wondering**, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.*

Here Jesus, patiently, as concretely as possible, was trying to clear up the confusion. He was demonstrating, not his *divinity* but his *humanness*! Look at my body, look at my wounds, consider my physical pain. Hear that I need to eat, I am hungry. Don't you understand it is about my humanness, that I suffer as our people suffer from being beaten, persecuted, starved? Are you looking for God? Do you want to know the Father? Look here, right here, at my body, look at my wounds, feed my hunger. My ministry, this whole story you have been part of since the beginning is about that suffering and about mind and the heart and the heart of God who feels that pain and experiences that hunger. Look at my wounds, know my pain, feed my hunger! And then go and do this for the least of these, meaning those under the wheel, suffering under the boot of oppression, that is what God wants, this is Torah.

Jesus, over and over again, makes himself very clear about this. But in its clarity, in its radical truthfulness, it is not so easy for people to understand.

South African theologian Albert Nolan – how many of you know his book: *Jesus Before Christianity*? Acquire this slim book, published over 25 years ago, it's up there with *Jesus and the Disinherited* – Nolan writes:

*It has often been said that Jesus had a radically new image of God. This is perfectly true except that this is not the way Jesus himself would have put it. As Jesus would have thought of it, **God had changed.** The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was doing something new and unprecedented.*

And why was God doing this? *God was responding to man* – it was the signs of the times, the urgent conditions prevailing in the world, yes, *the politics of the place* — that had moved God to compassion, to a change of mind. And we must follow, says Jesus, and I am here to show you God's heart and mind and what to do. This is Jesus' pronouncement on initiating his ministry and then on that Sabbath Day in Nazareth isn't it? "The time – *kairos* – *God breaking in*– is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, — *metanoiete* – *change your mind*, radically reorient yourself — and believe in the good, new, message."

Nolan defines faith as "a change in mind and heart, a change of allegiance. a radical reorientation of ones life...a straightforward decision in favor of the Kingdom of God."

These are strong words. This is not easy. And this is the story of Easter and what followed from this huge event. It is humanity's struggle to come to terms with the radical truth of Jesus' ministry.

This conversation continues in the Pentecost story. The time between Easter and Pentecost was a time of confusion and uncertainty — not revelation, not jubilation or celebration. For this entire period, the people had no idea what to make of what they had experienced, didn't understand Jesus' death and his sacrifice, didn't understand, still, what he meant by Kingdom of God.

It is 40 days past Easter. Jesus, having appeared on a number of occasions to the disciples, has told them not to leave Jerusalem, that they must wait just a few days for the fulfillment of the promise of the Father. In typical fashion, Jesus doesn't spend a lot of words explaining the why or the how of this. He says only that they will be baptized in the Holy Spirit. The disciples, as usual, are clueless. More than clueless — they get it completely wrong! As they have so many times before, they proceed to ask the wrong question, a question that reveals that they still do not understand what Jesus has been talking about these three years, even now, even after Easter. "Is it now Lord," they ask, "that you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Even now, they do not comprehend what is meant by the Kingdom of God.

When the power from the Holy Spirit that Jesus had predicted does indeed arrive, it comes as violent winds and fire like tongues that confer the ability to speak in all the languages of the known world! *This* is the power that came to the disciples. *It was not about restoring the kingdom to Israel.* It was not a restoration at all, not a return to a former state of glory or stability, *not that kind of power.* It is something completely new. From the kingdom of Israel – from Jerusalem — we have moved to the ends of the earth – all places, all peoples, all humanity, all the earth.

This is the *metanoia* from that first proclamation in Nazareth. Here is the radical reorientation, change in heart and mind, the radical new allegiance. It's a political statement, something new. *Leave Jerusalem. This old order is over.*

Then the text takes a complete turn:

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."

What a shift. Abruptly, we have left the world of hunger, of flesh and bones and wounds and suffering and physical mutilation, not ghosts at all but living breathing suffering human beings. Now, at verse 44, we are in the world of atonement theology and Messiahs rising from the grave, and scriptures not about compassion and justice for human beings on earth but about the fulfillment of biblical prophecies. This passage is Luke's editorial comment added to the Easter story. These words do not appear in Mark or Matthew — this is Luke summing up the meaning of the Gospel as he sees it, and, as we know about Luke, very focused on Jerusalem. I am not here to discount this aspect of the Gospel message, but I am saying, let us not be distracted, distracted as the church became so woefully distracted soon enough after these events and over the ages and into our own day. Let us not be distracted by Jerusalem. Up to verse 44 are Jesus' words are about who he is – Jesus, in his humanness, God showing us his heart, his pain, his humanness. Look at my people, know their wounds. Feel their hunger. Bring the Kingdom. Here. Starting now. Why do you seek for the living among the dead? I am here, with you, everywhere you look as you walk through the world, in every moment where you confront the choice of how to respond to the urgent needs all around you.

It's so easy to be confused, even, especially, when the truth before our eyes is so clear. Clueless, like the apostles – even the women, who are not usually as easily confused as the men – are in the face of the truth of Easter and the politics of Empire.

God breaks in when we most need that to happen. The appearance of Jesus was the first *kairos* – God breaking into history. The *euangelion* – the message, the good news, the wake up call.

We gather this week to celebrate *Kairos* – God's inbreaking into the times in which we live. We hear the words of a Palestinian Christian woman and worker for peace, Jean Zaru. We witness the signs of the times in the dispossession and ethnic cleansing of Palestine, the tragedy, not only of the Palestinian people, but of the Jewish people who have attempted to build their redemption at the cost of the attempted erasure of another civilization. Praise God that we are seeing the end of the so-called peace process, which has been in reality a colonization process, supported by false theologies, sham politics, and calls for moderation and reconciliation that serve to preserve and advance the tyranny and the injustice. We hear its death rattle, and we pray that now Israel can open up to the new thing. The giving way to the building of the Kingdom. And it's not to be in Jerusalem – it's about the wide world, speaking all the languages

of humankind.

The Kairos Palestine document, titled “A Moment of Truth: A Word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering” calls to the churches of the world. It articulates a theology that requires nonviolent resistance to the evil of occupation: resistance “with love as its logic.” Naming the Israeli occupation a sin, it calls out to the international community, reserving its final appeal for the church itself: “What is the international community doing? What are the political leaders in Palestine, in Israel and in the Arab world doing? What is the Church doing?” The document calls the church to its core mission.

And now that theology is being attacked. It is called anti-Semitic, charged with calling for the destruction of Israel. It is not, and it does not. It calls on Israel to stand for justice, to stand for equality, to stand with the prophets. It is classic liberation theology. Listen:

If the church does take sides, it is with the oppressed, to stand alongside them, just as Christ our Lord stood by the side of each poor person and each sinner, calling them to repentance, life, and the restoration of the dignity bestowed on them by God and that no one has the right to strip away.

Kairos Palestine challenges exceptionalism, the right to conquer in the name of God, or the Bible, or the history of Jewish suffering. But it’s a story we know so well: when the powers and principalities are threatened, they fight back.

Somebody is always not going to like someone’s Liberation Theology.

There is much more at stake here than one people’s struggle for liberation. More at stake than whether the church will claim its mission and stand with the oppressed Palestinians as it did in the global struggle against South African Apartheid and Jim Crow in America and the poor in Central America and Africa suffering under the heel of despotic regimes and the marginalized and suffering groups in our own society. South African theologian Allen Boesak puts it this way in a recent essay entitled “Kairos Consciousness.” “There are those Christians,” he writes,

and sometimes whole hierarchies of churches, who seek to use the Bible, the tradition and theology to serve and protect to the detriment of the poor, the weak and the vulnerable. On the other side of the conflict are those with a Kairos consciousness – who understand God’s call as a call to commit themselves to justice and the liberation of the oppressed... Much more than only the liberation of the oppressed is at stake here...the integrity of the Gospel, and the credibility of the witness of the church are at stake here.

“Our starting point, writes Albert Nolan in *Jesus Before Christianity*, “is the urgent reality of our present historical situation....If we cannot achieve an unobstructed view of Jesus from the vantage point of our current circumstances, then we cannot obtain an unobstructed view of him at all.”

And I cannot stand in this place without quoting Howard Thurman, who writes in *Jesus and the Disinherited*:

It is necessary to examine the religion of Jesus against the background of his own age and people, and to inquire into the content of his teaching with reference to the disinherited and the underprivileged.

Thurman challenged the Christianity of his own time, which he characterized as “sterile... muffled, confused and vague,” unconnected to “what the teachings and life of Jesus have to say to those who stand, at a moment in human history, with their backs against the wall.”

Thurman understood Jesus in his Jewishness, as do I. He saw him as the best Jew – as do I. And in so doing Thurman speaks directly to the contemporary Jewish struggle to turn back from the brink of disaster. Listen:

Jesus did not consider himself as one who stood outside of Israel. Jesus felt he was merely serving as a creative vehicle for *the authentic genius of Israel*, completely devoted to the will of God. In order to love those of the household one must conquer one’s own pride. In their attitude of pride he seemed to see the profoundest betrayal of the purpose of God.

As Jesus challenged the religious establishment of his time, as Martin Luther King Jr. called upon the church of his time to be faithful to its foundational principles, as the South African churchwomen and churchmen called their own church to account, so the church is challenged today.

Kairos creates a home for those who have been toiling for justice within their own congregations, campuses, communities and denominations but in isolation from one another. Kairos reminds us that this is the heart of the church – the Holy Spirit infusing the community of the faithful with the power to make disciples of the nations, to bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth. This is, of course, a radical departure from the praxis and sadly in some cases also the doctrine of our current church institutions, churches, in theologian Duncan Forrester’s words, plagued by “faithless self-obsession,” South African theologian and South Africa Kairos document author Charles Villa-Vicencio asks whether a creative, prophetic drive can penetrate the institutional church, a church conditioned by a history of compromise with, indeed of having joined the structures of oppression: “Can religion truly break the iron cage of history? Can religion produce a qualitatively different kind of society? Is the Kingdom of God a real possibility?”

Yes, it can. If we leave Jerusalem. If we open to the new thing. If we let God break in.

Do you think I come to bring peace? asks Jesus. “Not at all, rather *division*.” The Greek *diamesmiron* means making a dividing line, taking sides, knowing the difference – between a theology and a church that support oppression and a theology and a church that speak truth to power. Here is how Kairos USA, “Call to Action: A U.S. Christian Response to the Kairos Palestine document” expresses it:

As individuals and as church institutions, we have supported a system of control, inequality and oppression through misreadings of our holy scriptures, flawed theology, and distortions of history, supporting theological and political ideas that have made us complicit in the oppression of the Palestinian people. Instead of speaking and acting boldly, we have contented ourselves with careful statements designed to avoid controversy and leave cherished relationships undisturbed.

We have accepted the narrative of a vulnerable State of Israel beset by powerful, implacable enemies, thereby excusing the state from actions that violate international law, isolate Israel in the community of nations, and virtually eliminate the possibility of a sustainable peace.

The South Africans said it for their time, a time much like our time: "It is the KAIROS or moment of truth not only for apartheid but also for the Church. It is the moment of grace and opportunity, the favorable time in which God issues a challenge to decisive action. A moment of truth that shows us up for what we really are."

Let us pray.

God of Creation, who walks with us, loves us, shows us your heart and your will, be with us this day and on all days as we seek to know you. Let our coming together in this place these lecture days open our eyes, shine the light on our confusion – break in on us! Help us to understand that the power of faith – and it is powerful – is the power of truth. Let your truth break into our time here and as we go out to the wide world.

Amen