

Resurrection Power
John 20: 1- 18
First United Church of Christ, Northfield, MN
April 4, 2021
Rev. Wendy Vander Hart

May God still speak through these words of scripture and sermon.

It was not into a healed life that resurrection came- it was into a broken one. Jesus' body broken on a cross. Mary Magdalene broken down in weeping grief. The disciple Peter broken down by his denial.

We have spent the last six weeks of Lenten journey on the theme of Healing: A Season of Recovery. It has been so helpful to name the people and places where healing is needed- even our very selves.

Brokenness is still with us. One need only watch two minutes of the trial of Derek Chauvin to see the fragmentation in our society. One need only hear the rhythmic thumping of a ventilator breathing for someone with Covid to know so much is still broken in our world. One need only know that there are still over 500 lead water pipes to replace in Flint, MI to know so much seems irreparable in our world.

And yet, we hope, because it is into such a fragmented, broken seemingly irreparable world that resurrection happens.

For Mary Magdalene resurrection broke into a world veiled in tears- big goopy weepy tears after watching her Teacher executed on a cross, buried in a borrowed grave and upon visitation finding the stone rolled away and his body gone. Imagine coming with flowers to a freshly dug grave and finding it empty with no explanation. Mary runs looking for a reason, but her fellow followers have none and leave her there alone with her tears.

As she turns in her distress, she meets a stranger with a familiar voice, once he speaks her name. Impossible, there is no way this could be Jesus. There is no way it could not be Jesus either saying, "Mary." She reaches out to him to grab hold, probably vowing to never let go again. Instead, Jesus turns her around and says "go, tell," sending a woman with the most incredible news ever.

There is great reason to rejoice that Jesus in a resurrected body has this conversation. From it springs our conviction that death will never have the final word, only love does. Praise God for this.

And praise God for the fact that because Jesus has this particular conversation with a female witness to his resurrected body and that he tells her to "go and tell" convicts us that resurrection is not just for the dead, but also the living. It matters that Mary Magdalene is the only consistent witness to the empty tomb across all four gospel accounts. It matters that Jesus sends her out with a message. The great theologian Jürgen Moltmann said, "Without women preachers, we would have no knowledge of the resurrection." Resurrection power gave Mary Magdalene voice and there are more stories of human transformation ever since.

Like the story of Venture Smith. Venture Smith was captured as a boy in Ghana, brought to North America as a slave in the 18th century, and served for about 30 years under several different masters in Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New York. Then he purchased his own freedom, and then he purchased his children and his wife, and then he went into the freedom business, saving up money and buying people so he could set them free. Marilyn Nelson wrote this incredible poem from Venture's perspective imagining his thoughts as he surveyed his land and scanned his resurrected life:

"By the time I was thirty-six I had been sold / three times. I had spun money out of sweat. / I'd been cheated and beaten. I had paid an enormous sum / for my freedom. And ten years farther on I've come / out here

to my garden at the first faint hint of light / to inventory the riches I now hold. / My potatoes look fine and my corn, my squash, my beans. / My tobacco is strutting, spreading its velvety wings. / My cabbages are almost as big as my head. / From labor and luck, I have much profited. / I wish I could remember those praise-songs / we used to dance to, with the sacred drums...Yes, everything I own is dearly bought, / but gratitude is a never-emptying cup, / my life equal measures pain and windfall... / My wife and two of my children stir in my house. / For one thirty years enslaved, I have done well. / I am free and clear; not one penny do I owe. / I own myself—a five-hundred-dollar man— / and two thousand dollars' worth of family. / Of canoes and boats, right now I own twenty-nine. / Seventy acres of bountiful land is mine. / God or gods, thanks for raining these blessings on me. / I turn around slowly. I own everything I scan.”¹

As remarkable as the life of Smith is there is also the fact that this year will be the 25th annual Venture Smith Day in East Haddam, Connecticut at the Congregational Church he belonged to and in whose cemetery, he is buried. The church in partnership with the town and historical society have used the occasion to tell Smith's story and honor the transformation it portends. At the annual event a reunion picture of Venture's descendants will be taken- nine generations free.

Resurrection power can turn enemies into partners. Rachel Held Evans, a young evangelical theologian and blogger was on the receiving end of hate mail because her theology began to extend a more extravagant welcome than her peers approved. It troubled her so until she took up a Lenten practice to transform the hate mail. She wrote,² “For Lent this year, I wanted to learn a new creative skill that would enable me to turn something ugly into something beautiful, so I resolved on Ash Wednesday to turn some of my hate mail into origami. I've been making origami off and on for forty days now, letting my fingers pray out little swans and sailboats and flowers and foxes, and I've learned some things: about reverse folds and crimp folds, about trial and error, about patience, about retracing steps and following directions, about forgiveness, about letting go, about redirecting some of my anxious and self-focused energy into purposeful acts of creativity and healing, about building bridges, about asking for help.”

Evans continued, “What I learned turning my hate mail into origami is that we're meant to remake this world together. We're meant to hurt together, heal together, forgive together, and create together. And in a sense, even the people who continue to hate me and call me names are a part of this beautiful process. Their words, carelessly spoken, spent the last 40 days in my home— getting creased and folded, worked over, brushed aside to make room for dinner, stepped on by a toddler, blacked out, thrown away, turned into poems, and folded into sailboats and cranes and pigeons that now sit smiling at me from my office window. Because I am a real human being, living a very real life, with a very real capacity to be hurt, to be loved, to heal, and to forgive. And so are my enemies.”

Rachel wrote more and if you participate in Greening the Cross on our front lawn you can pick up the devotional with all of her words. Her story gives us clues to resurrection power.

And so does Jesus. What he does in his resurrected body gives us evidence about the life-giving, healing power of resurrection. He forgives, he breathes peace, he does not seek revenge but spreads love.

And what about you and me? What is your resurrection story? Where have you found your voice or empowered the voice of another? Where have you freed someone? Where can you transform, with God's help, the harm to good?

I have seen resurrection power in you. I have seen a dogged determination to create lives for all people lived fairly and free. I have experienced your compassion. This is the way God work in the world – through people

¹ Marilyn Nelson, [On Being podcast](#), February 23, 2017

² Rachel Held Evans, [What I Learned Turning My Hate Mail into Origami](#), April 2013

like you and me and we. Each act of kindness, peace, joy, hope, justice and love matter. They are our resurrection witness. They are our testimony to the God who loves us just the way we are and too much to let us stay that way. This is our Easter proclamation. We are charged with resurrection power to repair the world. Go and tell, hope and live. Hallelujah, Hallelujah. Amen.