

John 20: 1-18
April 12, 2009 Easter Sunday
Reverend Robin Sherman

“The Mystics are gathering in the street. Come out!”

“Leave me alone, I’m sick.”

“I don’t care if you’re dead! Jesus is here, and he wants to resurrect somebody!”

These words were written in the 13th Century by the Persian poet Rumi. “I don’t care if you’re dead. Jesus is here, and he wants to resurrect somebody!”

These words struck me as I thought about our resurrection this Easter. The church is definitely in need of resurrection but the question remains; do we really want to be resurrected or are we satisfied with resuscitation? Has it become easier to simply go with the flow? Do we really want to shake things up? Do we want to resurrect ourselves so that even those closest to us may not recognise us? This is the story of resurrection.

Mary Magdalene is looking for Jesus, she sees him but does not recognise him, she thinks he is the gardener until he calls her by name. Jesus’ resurrection brings him to life in a way that others do not recognise, he looks different. Is this what the church needs to be resurrected, to look different?

I recently read what a church in need of resurrection might look like. Here are some of the typical comments on the church today:

- Sunday school is the same old, same old Bible stories told over again. Sunday school classes very seldom discuss issues of alcohol, drug abuse or sex unless someone has been “cured” or is abstaining
- Prayer concerns are always for those who we know who are sick and of course we should pray for them but few prayer lists include violence in the local schools, the fear of being single, marital problems or struggles with depression
- Bible studies are mostly kind-hearted discussions. Bible studies usually steer clear of controversy, opting for answers that are always about the same
- Worship is safe, predictable biblical text, hymns, prayers. Sermons tend to present a timid gospel, avoiding difficult issues, even though Jesus’ first sermon was about bigotry and the crowd tried to throw him off a cliff
- Ministries and outreach are cautious – women’s groups, men’s breakfast, seniors lunch, choir; we use our websites to list the things we are doing. Our ministries stay clear of issues of the day – war, violence, discrimination. Again Jesus’ first sermon has God anointing Christ and his followers to preach “good news to the poor, release to the captives, give sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed.” Few of us spend much time with the lost, poor, blind, or imprisoned. Very few of these issues are listed on our websites.

(Brett Younger, McAfee School of Theology, *Lectionary Homiletics, Volume XX, Number 3*, p. 18)

Last spring at the Annual Conference I attended we were asked to sit in groups with a mix of ages and ask the question why would younger people come to our churches.

The teenager in our group said this:

Why would I come to your church when all you talk about is who is not there, how the numbers are decreasing, the money is decreasing, how much longer before we die. I want to go to a church that is alive. I want to go to a church that wants to survive, that is concerned with environmental issues like pollution and drinking water and the state of our wildlife, political issues like poverty and homelessness and injustice, and spiritual things like does God really care if we pray or not; does God even exist? I want to go to a church that is aware of the events of the world and is not afraid to talk about them. I want to know what the church I'm going to attend is doing outside the four walls of the Sunday morning meeting, a church that is visible in the community.

We sat in stunned silence. Do we deliver? Could we say to this young person, hey that's us, come on down? No, at least the congregations I was serving could not.

Could we here in Prince Edward County? I'm not sure yet. I'm not sure whether we are satisfied with resuscitation or if we are seeking resurrection. But why should we be sure, the disciples weren't sure back on that first Easter. In fact Peter and the other unnamed disciple, the one referred to as the one Jesus loved, went home. One could argue that they were the deadest church in town! They simply go home. Mary hangs around to grieve, perhaps the last mourner in the dead church.

What was she waiting for? Certainly there was no CSI to swoop in and find out the real story, to follow the leads, to find the body, to check the DNA and give a report to the police. No, Mary simply is overcome with sadness, consumed by darkness, weeping at the loss of a special friend. Most of us have been in this place. Our personal Good Friday's when all hope is gone; when there seems to be no one to turn to; our loved one is gone and we don't know where they have taken them. We saw that they were dead, we saw them being buried. We ask in desperation, "Tell me where they have taken him?" Ministers are asked this question a lot. Where did they go? Is there really a heaven? If God is so powerful why did this happen? If God loves us why does that happen? How can God allow such darkness? The answer is in the resurrection.

"Jesus is here, and he wants to resurrect somebody!"

Jesus speaks Mary's name and the person in front of her is no longer the gardener, they have become Jesus. She recognises him when he says her name and in that moment her darkness becomes light, her despair gives way to hope, life overcomes death. It is in this moment that Mary moves from being the last mourner at the tomb to being the first witness of a living church. Mary has been resurrected into new life. In her excitement she tries to grab on to Jesus but he tells her, do not cling to me.

Jesus cannot be held down, Jesus is on the loose. He cannot be held in a tomb, he cannot be contained. He is here today and he wants to resurrect somebody.

Mary runs to tell the others, I have seen the risen Lord. I don't care how dead you think you are, Jesus is here and he wants to resurrect someone!"

Are we ready for resurrection? Can we be moved from a place of deep grief and sorrow to a living, vibrant, faith community? Can we say "YES" to resurrection?

Today's world is full of reasons why we might not seek resurrection. There is no sure thing right now. People are losing jobs, the economy is unsteady, the war continues in the Middle East, women and children are still living in poverty in one of the richest countries in the world, natural disasters are taking lives, children are growing up too fast, drugs and alcohol and gambling are too prevalent, we have become complacent to disrespectful people, disease still kills, human beings are still traded in slavery, our health care is going down the drain.

It's still Friday at a lot of churches, and in a lot of hearts. But it doesn't have to be; it is simply a decision that we make, Jesus is here it is Sunday morning and we are being called by name to be a resurrected people.

Brett Younger who created that list of churches in need of resurrection says this, "God knows some of us may feel dead but God wants to resurrect the church. God wants the church to let go of its old habits, judgments, and prejudices. God wants us to give up the evil speech that kills the church. It's time to stop worrying about offending and start offering God's grace to everyone. The Spirit will lead us and take us beyond what we thought we could do and be, taking with us the best of the past as we move forward into a better future.

God is calling the church to new life, to good, appropriate and helpful ministries, as well as dangerous, demanding and difficult ones. God is inviting us to seek out those who feel almost dead to share God's love. God is pleading with us to welcome all kinds of people and become genuine friends. God is calling us to be a church with a warm heart, an open mind, and an adventurous spirit."

Easter has come; the resurrection has come; it's time to get busy!