

Sermon Year B, IV Easter 2015 Preached by Lyle
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The Easter season is rightly the longest (named) season in the church year because resurrection directs our hearts to the core of our religion. Lent is 40 days; Easter tops that at 50 days. Alleluia, Christ is risen! This morning, in the middle of our Easter Joy, we have the comforting and beautiful image of Jesus –The Good Shepherd – and the poetry of parable, “The Lord is my Shepherd . . .” So, again and again, Alleluia, Christ is risen!

Haven't we so much to *learn* – so little time, so little patience? Maybe some Easter (by the 46th day) we will *learn* to trust in God's grace rather than expect to get it all. Maybe we will give up on being *judged worthy* because we believe everything on the list of things to be believed about the Resurrection, etc. etc. Maybe we will learn someday that Faith, after all, is about trust not correct ideas.

Fortunately, bluebirds, like the sparrows of which Jesus spoke, show us what trust looks like. They look for no reward. They live and sing and THEY FLY.

A Mennonite pastor told a springtime story (Published in *Christian Century*: April 15, '15) about a bluebird house he was given by a neighbor. He proudly put it upon a wooden post in his garden. You birders this morning can tell what is coming. A lovely pair of Bluebirds nested, hatched chicks. A neighbor's cat climbed the post and ate the chicks. A lesson was learned. So the pastor got a metal pole and tried again. (At this point in the story, I am thinking, No way!) But the lovely pair returned and hatched a new brood. The chicks flourished and fledged and flew the nest in due season.

The pastor concluded that that is what HOPE looks like, stubborn hope – like the way bluebirds come back and make way for life in the midst of a world of death. The pastor suggested that that is hope from the Divine perspective – or at least in harmony with it: consistent with the Gospel. The Gospel IS that for us eternal life, the Kingdom of God, begins in this lifetime, “in the midst of death we are in life.”

The Gospel IS about life in this lifetime and resurrection means that whenever the worst thing imaginable happens in this life, it is never the last thing.
(PAUSE)

“When I was a little girl,” wrote a German nun about her life in 1940s wartime Germany, “there was really only one question about Christianity that interested me: Is there life after death? For her it was more than an interest, it was an obsession. “I would sometimes lie awake nights terrified, picturing myself in a coffin – and that childish question, that childhood fear grew darker and more difficult as the wartime nights (that she endured) dragged on.” Can you imagine!?

In 1994, 3 years before I retired, I visited a small San Francisco bookstore and casually browsed every section looking for a good read. Yes, I found my way to the RELIGION SECTION and picked up a small volume (published that year in English translation by Harper San Francisco). The title was ***Putting Away Childish Things***, the Author was that German girl, now Catholic nun and theologian: Ute Ranke-Heinemann.

The original German title was ***Nein und Amen (No and Amen)*** but was given the English title ***Putting Away Childish Things*** and a long sub-title, “. . . Tales You Don’t Have to Believe to Have a Living (Christian) Faith.” I was about to put the book back on the shelf when the name Rudolf Bultmann jumped off a page.

When I was in Seminary in the early 1960s Rudolf Bultmann was one of the most quoted New Testament scholars in the world. Another being Karl Barth. Bultmann was said to be the “demythologizer” and Barth was, “Neo-orthodox.”

It turns out that teen aged Ute had lived with the Bultmann family in Germany and studied Greek classics and the New Testament in Greek with Rudolf Bultmann up until the allied victory in Europe. So thinking that Ute might help me finally understand what Bultmann was all about, I bought the book. I read the book – am still putting away childish things.

So do I understand Bultmann? So little time! We have to move on now - but in Seminary, I first learned from Bultmann that while St Paul, was the first to proclaim the truth of the Resurrection in letters to the churches, he never said word one about an empty tomb. St Paul either did not know the accounts of an empty tomb or thought them not worth mentioning. And yet he insisted, “If Christ is not raised then our faith is in vain!” I Cor. 15:14. Experience of resurrection in Christian life and witness, consistent with St Paul’s letters is easier for me to accept than are the stories of the tomb. How do we grasp and acknowledge the power of resurrection.

Bultmann was said by his critics (including Ute's own father) not to believe in the Resurrection. According to Ute, he answered his critics in all charity, "You either do not yourself understand the Resurrection, or you do not understand what it is I believe."

If Ute's childhood question, "Is there life after death?" is not what Christian faith is all about, what is it about, and what are we expected to do about it?

In today's Epistle, light is cast on our way, if not our way to answers then, our way to a better questions. Listen to the voice of an early Christian community, the ***Community of the Beloved Disciple*** (That is the title to the late Raymond Brown's book about the N.T. Johanine writings). Listen to that church's question.

"Does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? . . . Let us love, not in word or speech (alone), but in truth and in action." I John 3:16ff

The writer of First John is clear that love is what it is all about, and that love is behavior, not sentiment, ethic not an intention, ***action***, not abstraction. Love on earth as it is in heaven, in this lifetime.

Love as demonstrated by Jesus is compassion, born out of grace in solidarity human-with-human, incarnate God with humanity lifted up. Love is a risk-taking-behavior, a costly habit and a change-making-ethic.

For the Christian Community, love is a movement and not a feeling. What else can it mean that we are called to lie down our lives, or as in the Gospels, “take up your cross and follow me?”

The Collect of the Day, the psalm and gospel all point to the image of the Good Shepherd, and the characteristics of LOVE are highlighted in this epistle. So I feel compelled to focus on following the Good Shepherd not as an endearing, sentimental image but as a call to do justice: JUSTICE –all caps intended. I think this Lord’s Day, this Good Shepherd Sunday we are called to do justice, show mercy and walk humbly (in solidarity) with God.

Some of you here at St Peter’s know Jon Dominic Crossan (the Jesus scholar) better than I do. Some have read him, traveled to the Mediterranean with him and workshopped with him. He taught many of us to see in the historical Jesus what we had not learned from church attendance or conventional church teaching. And also to recognize that Christian love is not just a motive for justice, it is Justice.

In his beautiful little book, *The Greatest Prayer* (Published by Harper One, 2010), Crossan observes that: Like Paul, “The Hebrew prophets spoke of a God *of* Justice. But nowhere in the Bible does any writer say that God is Justice. But I John says twice that *God is love*. If we can say, “God is love” why can’t we proclaim that, God is Justice?

Crossan asks, “Would we then be playing divine-justice and divine-love against each other” (as some do)? If not, then how are love and justice to be reconciled in Christian consciousness?” He wants to know if justice is the hard side of the coin and Love the soft, forgiving side? Is God’s temperament as bipolar as that, or is there divine integrity/consistency in here somewhere?

Crossan answers himself and concludes his book with the following story. “In the 1940s I was in boarding school in Letterkenny, County Donegal, Ireland . . . we schoolboys had to learn poems by heart, and in my teens I learned that in John Keats’ “Ode to a Grecian Urn” the Urn’s message is:

***Beauty is truth,
Truth is beauty,
That is all ye know on earth,***

And all ye need to know.

“Now, almost 65 years later,” Crossan summarized what (he) learned from writing (his) biblical meditation on the prayer Jesus taught. His alternative to the Grecian Urn’s message is inscribed on, “A Biblical Urn of stone,” and it tells us the following:

***JUSTICE IS LOVE,
LOVE IS JUSTICE.
That is all we to know on earth,
And all we need to know.***

I think Ute would say now that her preoccupation with life after death was at best, a distraction. Not at all the same as trusting in Life eternal. Her fretting about life after death was a red herring, unworthy of the trust she put in the Good Shepherd. If any of us is to follow where he leads us, we must cast aside that preoccupation, that distraction. Then will we be free to answer the Good Shepherd’s call: “Follow me!”

When asked if he believed in life after death, our late Bishop James Pike said, “I believe in one life at a time.” So, in that spirit, let us live this life and listen for the call to be agents of justice/love which is God’s will, “on earth as it is in heaven.”

