

The Day the World Began (Again)

At this time of year people like me—church and theology geeks—make a point of listening to Easter messages prepared by church leaders. Nowadays, these often take the form of videos posted to YouTube, and shared on social media, on Facebook and Twitter. Our United Church has produced one featuring our Moderator the Rt. Rev. Jordan Cantwell, and other churches have produced them too.

In recent years I've found myself growing increasingly restless as I listen to and watch these messages, particularly those that are produced by what we sometimes call the "liberal mainline" church, the United Church, Anglicans, and similar denominations.

If you've been following my preaching in the last year or so you may have some idea of why that is, why it is I get restless listening to some of these messages.

It's largely because these messages generally attempt to explain the miracle of Easter—God's resurrection of Jesus from the dead—in terms that make sense to our modern sensibilities. We spend a lot of time and effort in the liberal church trying to make God's resurrection of Jesus "fit" with our scientific understanding of

how reality works, and with our politics, our ideological agendas.

To make the story fit with our science, we turn it into a metaphor of new beginnings, rather like the way that things come to life again in the spring after the death of winter. That's a nod to the ancient pagan roots of our culture. Or we tell the story as a metaphor for how love is stronger than hate, and will win out in the end. In that telling of the story, the man Jesus is still dead on Easter morning, but "lives on" in the hearts and minds of his followers, inspiring them to take up the mantle of his mission of healing and teaching and bringing people together. And here's where it can get ideological, because we see ourselves as the descendants of those disciples, carrying on the mission and vision of Jesus in our own day, through our commitment to justice and social action.

The problem I have with these approaches is that none of them require the active involvement of God. Atheists can believe in spring; atheists can believe in the transformative power of love to counteract hate. Atheists can believe in social justice and making the world a little fairer.

And don't get me wrong—I'm not knocking atheists here: it's a good thing for people to celebrate the return of spring and the goodness of the earth; it's a good thing that people, whatever their religious belief or other beliefs, believe in the dignity of all people and in social justice.

Those are all good things, but they are not the Church's story. Those are human stories. They're good, but they just don't take us very far. All they have to offer us is some slightly better version of the world we already know; provided that is, that we all put in a bit of effort. The focus in these tellings is always on what we do, or what we could do. When we try to make sense of the Easter story in terms of our science or our ideology, that's all we get: a slightly tweaked version of the world we already know, because it all depends on us.

That's really why I am restless with those tellings of the story: they're just too small, too limited, too dull in comparison with the story that Paul read for us this morning.

Did you notice that the central image in the story that Paul read for us is an earthquake? A seismic, cataclysmic disruption, a rupture! After this, nothing can ever be the same again. It's not an image of continuity, or incremental improvement. It's not anything that is continuous with what went before. It's not something that can be explained by our science, or can be made to harmonize with our politics. It is something that God has done: it is the

decisive intervention of God in human history that forever changes, forever changes, our reality.

It is nothing less than the end of one world, and the beginning of another. What God has done in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus is interrupt the whole trajectory of human history, to call a stop to all that had been in human culture: all our half-hearted attempts at justice, and at being good, and at living with respect in creation and with one another, and our sporadic attempts at being in relationship with God.

Good Friday showed us where we often end up when left to our own devices. Where our human judgment, and human wisdom, and human politics leads. The crucifixion of Jesus absorbs all of that. It takes our brokenness and failure, the futility of our limited efforts to their end point. You want to see where our good intentions lead? Look at the cross. You want to see where our technology often leads? Look at the cross. You want to see where our politics leads? Look at the cross.

But then God responds on Easter. In the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, God does for us what we could not do for ourselves. Having absorbed all of our failures and disappointments, our brokenness and hatred and fear, God cancels the debt and makes a whole new world.

God's resurrection of Jesus on Easter is the seismic interruption that

enables us to begin again. From the Church's perspective, the story only makes sense as a story of what God has done. It doesn't make any sense if you can tell the story without God. Without God we can manage crucifixion, but we can't get to resurrection.

When we try to make the story make sense in terms of our science and our politics and our notions of reality, we are like those who are going to the tomb looking for dead Jesus, picking amongst the grave clothes, clinging to the past: brokenhearted, disappointed, grieving, frozen to the spot, seeking some scrap with which to console ourselves.

But that story is too small. At Easter God gives us so much more than the return of spring. God gives us so much more than a vague promise that love is stronger than death, and will win out in the end. In the light of Easter morning, by the grace and mercy and awesome power of God, the old world is finished, and a new world has begun.

"He is not here," the angel said. "He has been raised." Now go! Go and live like nothing in your past really matters any more because all things are made new. Go and shed the limitations of what your science and your politics told you was possible. Go and see that a whole new world has been born, because God has made it so. In the light of Easter morning all things are possible with God.

Friends, on this day of resurrection we have a choice. We can

comfort ourselves with the little stories we have known, the wistful, sad tales that comfort us in our disappointments. Or we can allow our lives and our world to be cracked open to allow the Good News in: God has raised the crucified Jesus from the dead, and nothing in our world need ever be the same again.

I want to close with a prayer from my friend Will Willimon. Let us pray:

"On this bright, shining day of days, we give thanks, O God. You loved us enough not to leave us in the grip of evil and death. You made a way when we thought there was no way. You took our settled arrangements with defeat and hopelessness and shook our world, turned things on their head.

"As once-crucified, once-dead Jesus strode from the tomb, we saw the truth of what you're up to in us and in our world. Not only was the stone rolled away from the tomb but also the fears and doubts that paralyze us were rolled away.

"Help us to obey the Easter angel's command and the command of the risen Christ, to go into the world with fear and joy and tell someone the truth: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! "

Amen.

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