

Sermon 4-25-21

Darren Wright preaching

A Story We Can't Stop Sharing

Sermon on Acts 4:5-10, 13-20

Have you ever seen, or tasted, or experienced something that was so amazing that you just had to share it with someone? Like our beautiful youth choir service in the incredible old sanctuary of St Stephens AME in Wilmington, NC a couple years ago.

It is one of the oldest churches in the country that was designed and built by and for a black congregation. Before the youth sang Rev. Nixon took us down to the basement of the church to show us the now empty swimming pool the congregation had built in the mid 20th century so that black and brown children could have a place to swim since they weren't allowed to swim in the public pools outside. They also showed us the entrance to the tunnel that used to be part of the underground railroad.

An incredible space with gracious hosts who heaped one of the biggest piles of spaghetti I've ever seen on my plate as they fed us dinner before the service. The youth choir sang beautifully and the service was over, but nobody was leaving. A crowd was growing at the front of the sanctuary.

Applejack, who had a jam session at a food kitchen with some of our youth earlier in the day after they learned he had once played with Prince, was playing the bass. Dr. Cooper, aka Billy C, was rocking out on the piano. The St. Stephens AME organist was by the piano shouting for Billy C to go ahead now.

Our youth, the congregation of St Stephen AME, and guests from the community were dancing and singing. I looked over to my left and watched as an older black woman we had met earlier in the day at a food kitchen was swinging her arm around her head and dancing. Her toothless smile

and joy were contagious as 5 or 6 of our youth were gathered around her imitating the new dance move and laughing.

We ended up laughing and dancing together for about 20 of the most holy minutes of my life. At the end of choir tour when we asked our youth about what stuck out to them from the tour it was the first time I ever experienced an almost unanimous response as person after person shared how that night was as close as they've ever felt to God.

In our text for today there's that statement from Peter and John, "as for us we can't stop speaking about what we have seen and heard." What are the stories and experiences you can't stop speaking about and where and how might God be at work in those stories? What is your resurrection story?

One of the things I love about Leticia is she likes to push back and challenge me on churchy words and phrases like resurrection story. She might say something like, but what does that even mean?

And this week our scripture helps us unpack the idea as some of the earliest Christians find themselves in trouble because they can't help but tell their resurrection stories.

So what exactly is a resurrection story? Like most things in scripture, there's plenty of mystery and more than one way to answer that question, but perhaps, to really understand the significance of the resurrection we have to go back to why Christ was crucified in the first place.

Under Roman law, crucifixion was reserved for enemies of the state and folks who were a direct challenge to Roman authority. The life of Jesus was filled with moment after moment of doing just that...

Even before Jesus was born Mary announced the coming of Jesus with words so revolutionary they have been banned in multiple countries as she sang "He has brought down rulers from their thrones and raised up the

humble. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with nothing.”

And she was clearly on to something because Jesus blessed a woman called unclean by others for her faith and courage to find him and touch his robe, and celebrates the faith of another woman called a sinner by others as she washes his feet with her tears and hair.

He was called a glutton and drunkard for having dinner parties with sinners and tax collectors.

He had no qualms with breaking unjust laws as he offered free healthcare pretty much everywhere he went, even on the Sabbath.

He called for economic justice repeatedly like when he challenged a wealthy young man that salvation is found in giving away your abundance so that those who are impoverished might be uplifted and empowered...and perhaps so that abundance doesn't become our God.

Time and again we find him confronting and rejecting systems of power and pursuing a different way of being in the world that centers the lives of those who are oppressed and marginalized so that all of God's creation might have the opportunity to flourish and live into their created potential.

Jesus encountered a predatory system that was thriving on creating its own parameters for justice. Parameters that ensured powerful and wealthy people stayed wealthy and powerful by impoverishing and oppressing those without power and money.

Jesus' response was to simply remind folks of God's justice by calling out those in power for getting caught up in money and authority, building relationships with people who were being rejected, and teaching and telling stories that pointed towards God's expansive and inclusive grace, love, power and justice.

And as Jesus' stories gained traction and as communities started orienting their lives more around God than Caesar, the response that made sense to those in power was to continue dealing death and make an example of this rebel through crucifixion.

So they kill him. Brutally and publicly. But the story doesn't end there as the resurrection story begins with an empty tomb and a mysterious person inviting faithful and courageous women to go and tell people Christ is risen.

Christ's resurrection story is God's declaration death dealing power has its limits. Hatred, despair, suffering, injustice, oppression, and even death are not the end of the story. Whatever it might be that strives to separate us from the love, hope, mercy, and justice of God doesn't have the last word.

In the words of Dr. Monica Coleman referring to the mystery and power of resurrection:

"To be able to find life when one cannot see even an arm's length in front of oneself, and to be able to feel or know love and breath after life has been vitiated – is nothing short of a miracle. To see value in the past after seasons of hopeless desperation and to stay in community when all reason says to walk away – is how I know mercy. To break bread with people who have intentionally hurt you and to retell stories that have lost meaning in the face of the apathy and hopelessness invoked by looking around – is how I think of grace. And the mystery is not that some people cannot do this; the mystery is that any of us manage to.

And resurrection reminds us...– that finding life after death and even perseverance in the face of death – is divine activity. Our wills and fortitudes alone shrivel with the task before it. And even if our God is not personal or loving, or transcendent or speaking-to-us, [and I would add even if we aren't sure if we believe in God at all], it is something outside of us and greater than us and yet deeply within us that moves us individually and communally to cling to the life side of the cliff."¹

¹ <https://monicaacoleman.com/why-resurrection-matters/>

And so when the beginning of our scripture for today tells us these religious and political leaders are getting together to put Peter and John on trial for telling their resurrection stories what we are witnessing is a confrontation between the very people and systems of power that condemned Jesus to die on a cross, and the power of resurrection and resurrection stories that give us hope...

The power of resurrection stories that move us to live out the vows our Confirmands will proclaim today rejecting the evil powers of this world and accepting the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression as we cling to the life side of the cliff.

And Peter and John are clinging to that life side of the cliff as they enter into dangerous territory and risk proclaiming God's justice over Rome's justice. They've witnessed the crucifixion and have every reason to keep quiet, but they've also witnessed the resurrection...and the resurrection, as theologian J.R. Daniel Kirk puts it, is "an annoyance to those who would use the power of death in their attempts to snuff out the living presence of the power of God."²

And so there's this miracle in our text for today that heightens the tension as those in power are clearly annoyed and nervous about the possibility using their power and authority to murder this subversive young brown man from Nazareth wasn't enough to snuff out this movement that isn't willing to play by their rules anymore.

Peter and John are supposed to just toss a coin to the man begging outside the temple and keep moving...to do just enough to feel okay without really upsetting the status quo. But they have resurrection stories of their own and in this moment they aren't able to keep walking by so they stop and they offer their hands and their prayers and whatever care they are able to give...and somehow the man is able to walk and all the people who used to see him sitting outside the temple are in awe as little seeds of hope start to take root that maybe life can be different.

²<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-acts-45-12-4>

And those seeds of hope, that recognition that the story can have a different ending, the clinging to the life side of the cliff, the possibility of resurrection, are terrifying to those in power...and I can hear the fear in their voices as they ask “In what name or power” was this done?

And that question itself, the act of interrogating rather than celebrating a sick person being cared for and restored to health, shows just how twisted and desperate to hang onto their power these folks were.

But Peter responds with the answer they are desperately hoping not to hear, “Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead.”

And it gets even better because when we look back at what in verse 9 is translated as healing, the Greek word is *sesotai* which literally means to save because the subversively good news and power offered in this resurrection story, is that salvation is not an end game, it’s right there in an overlooked man being cared for and jumping with joy, and it’s here and now in our own resurrection stories as we feed, sit, laugh, march, cry, pray, resist, and journey with each other.

20 minutes of holy laughter and dancing giving a beautifully diverse group of folks a glimpse of God, a resurrection story.

The guilty verdict on Tuesday, a resurrection story.

The legislation seeking to further criminalize homelessness failing to pass in TN last week, a resurrection story.

The new rainbow flag we received last year from a young queer person with a note sharing how the flag we have draped on the cross outside gave them a little hope, a resurrection story

The vows our Confirmands are about to take, a resurrection story.

The poem Lucy is going to share after my sermon, a resurrection story.

To affirm resurrection and to tell our resurrection stories is to proclaim the greatest annoyance that any life-taking power on earth might hear...it declares that ultimate power over the earth is still not power enough to control a person’s story.

And every moment that we tell our Easter story of Christ's resurrection, and every moment that we tell our own resurrection stories, we continue subverting the systems of power that seek to silence and reject the possibility that there is another way.

So what are the resurrection stories of your past and who might you share them with? And what are the resurrection stories that we might invite others into and tell together as we seek to live into God's kingdom here and now? These stories matter. Your story matters. Our story matters. As for us, we can't stop speaking about what we have seen or heard. May it be so, Amen.