

“Business as Unusual”

John 20:19-31, Acts 4:32-35

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During the spring that I was nine years old, my biggest concerns were having to start at a new school part way through the year and having to have my tonsils out. I don't really remember too much of what was going on in the rest of the world. It was the spring of 1968, fifty years ago, and the nation was shocked by the assassination of Dr. King, the riots in the streets, the shooting of Bobby Kennedy and the world was reeling from the Prague Spring and the Vietnam War. But I do remember how tense things were that year. I remember that my parents were ones who would always watch Walter Conkrite do the news every night, and I remember that every Friday he would report the number of people killed in Vietnam that week. I remember kids in my school who had older brothers who were nervous about when their draft numbers might come up. It was a hard year. It was a year of fear, of upset, and even of despair for some.

For some, it feels the similar to this year. Marches in the streets. People so upset with their government. Fear over climate change. Racial tensions. Concern over income inequality. Increasing international tensions. It also feels like a hard year. A year of fear, of upset, even of despair for some.

What do you do when the world feels like a place of fear? Where do you go when the world around you feels like a place that is dangerous? It's not just now, it's not just fifty years ago. It was 2000 years ago as well. Think about what it was like for the people of Israel then. For them, it wasn't just that their country was in a time of danger, their country had been conquered, occupied by a foreign power that was ruthless in its imposition of control. There were National Guard in the streets fifty years ago to keep the peace, we're talking about putting troops on our southern border because we are afraid, but 2000 years ago in Jerusalem there were Roman legions in the streets who would arrest and kill those

who upset the Pax Romana, the Roman Peace. And the leader that they had hoped might be the one who could lead their nation had been assassinated. And not just arrested and killed, but killed in a public, horrible way, accused of sedition, to set an example to anyone who might consider leading the people against the authority of Rome. What do you do when the world seems like such a scary, dangerous place?

You make it different. You act with hope. You take care of those around you. It may sound crazy, but the scarier the world gets, the more the world needs the church to act like differently, to not close up into itself like a clam closing up in its shell, but to go out of that upper room and be out in the streets like Luke describes in Acts 4.

As scary as this year seems to some, as scary as 1968 was to many, there was a time in the memory of some in this room that was more dangerous by far. A few years ago one of the projects of the youth of this church was to put together a book of memories of those who had lived through World War II. One of the insights was not just what life was like for those who went overseas, but for those who were at home. What was life like in 1942, the first real year America was in the war? How did the world feel then? How dark and scary? But there were people around the world who were beacons of hope during that time. I bring this up because one of them just passed away a couple of weeks ago at the age of 107. In the Netherlands in 1940 the country had been conquered and occupied by Nazi armies, more cruel and dangerous than anything we have to face. Johan van Hulst was the director of the Reformed seminary in Amsterdam during the time of the occupation of Holland. He found that the seminary where he worked had a yard that bordered on the nursery section of a facility in which the Nazis and collaborators imprisoned Jews before their dispatch to concentration camps. Van Hulst and his helpers would get word when a shipment of Jewish children were going to be coming into the facility. They would then doctor the records to say that there were actually less children to be accounted for. They would take Jewish children, hoist over the hedge that separated the two yards and then hide the children

in the seminary. From there, resistance activists and fighters would smuggle the children to safehouses, sometimes in laundry baskets and other times on bicycles, pretending that the children were their own. In this way, it is estimated that more than 600 Jewish children were saved from the camps. Van Hulst would always say that the hardest thing was that they could not save more. A few years ago, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu said, “We say, those who save one life saves a universe. You saved hundreds of universes. I want to thank you in the name of the Jewish people, but also in the name of humanity.”

In a time of darkness, of fear, how do you act? You take care of one another even more. The risen Christ appears to us and says, “Peace be with you.” That’s not just a greeting, it’s a state of being. It is acting like the resurrection is real and we have nothing to fear from darkness or despair or death.

How do we act in these days following Easter? Gail O’Day, professor of Preaching and New Testament at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta says, “Most Protestant Christians are not well attuned to Easter as a liturgical season; after Easter Sunday, Protestant church expectations return to something like business as usual. But nothing could be further from the case. The paschal mystery, the death and resurrection of Christ, is the centerpiece of the Christian faith, and the liturgical year devotes seven weeks to the Easter season, culminating in Pentecost. Importantly, the Sundays of this season are referred to not as Sundays *after* Easter, but as Sundays of Easter, Sundays fully shaped and embedded in the Easter gospel. For fifty days, the church lives into the reality of the resurrection, of what it means to be a community shaped by the dying and rising of Christ, by the expectation-shattering reality of life victorious over death.”¹

Not business as usual, but business as unusual. The disciples realize in those days following Easter that they live in a different world. Thomas has to be convinced, but even he is brought along. Before Easter they were hiding out in the upper room afraid of the religious authorities, afraid of the Roman occupation, afraid that by their association with Jesus that they too might be put to death. And so what

1 O’Day, Gail. *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*. P. 401.

happens to them? They encounter the resurrected Jesus, they become Easter people and they begin to live differently. And their fears come true, by the way. They all eventually face violent death. But they don't care. Or at least their fears are overcome by faith and love and hope. Because Easter is more powerful than their fears.

What would it mean for us to live as a community shaped by Easter. To come back here the week after Easter, not getting back to business as usual, but seeing this as something unusual, something different, something revolutionary. Andre Resner, who is a preaching professor in North Carolina says, "We have in our experience no analogy for resurrection. We preachers have to be forgiven for trying to make the resurrection "make more sense" by pointing to the return of spring after the dead of winter, or to butterflies that break through their cocoon tombs, or chicks that crack open their shells to life. We would do well instead to return to the misery, to use the metaphoric and aromatic words that point to a realm and a reality that this world does not and cannot understand. We would do well to risk being a resurrection community, to risk even what we thought we owned, for the sake of those who have need.

I think Wendell Berry has it right in his "Mad Farmer's Manifesto":

So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.
Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man
has not encountered he has not destroyed.
Ask questions that have no answers . . .
Practice resurrection.²

² Resner, Andre. *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, p. 393.*

It might look crazy to the rest of the world to act like the disciples did in the early church. Exactly. Because in the light of Easter, we see the world differently. Because in the light of Easter, we are different.