

DO YOU BELIEVE IN THE RESURRECTION?

John 20: 1-18

1) People do bad things to other people, and sometimes, they're really bad. 26 years ago, in a village in Rwanda, Tasiyan Nkundiye murdered his neighbour. The 43 year old Hutu and a few other men from the village attacked their neighbour with Machetes and cut him to pieces. This was but one horrific slaying during a 100-day genocide that killed an estimated 800,000 ethnic Tutsis and the Hutus who tried to protect them. Nkundiye was convicted of the killing and he spent 8 years in prison. This may seem far too short an imprisonment, but in a country where sentence after sentence was being past and few were left without blood on their hands, imprisonment for life would empty the country altogether.

Now, once Nkundiye was released, he was asked to be part of an experiment. The government was trying to organize what it called 'Reconciliation villages.' Victims and perpetrators who had served time for their crimes, were invited to live side by side in the same villages. Convicted killers would have to publicly apologize for their crimes and survivors were invited to forgive them. The hope was that healing could begin to happen.

But is this really possible? Forgiveness, that is? Many, in fact have been quite cynical, if not critical of this experiment. They feel it's a political stunt by the government, seeking aid money. Participants also get financial help with housing, school fees and other things. Any professed reconciliation is forced and artificial. Forgiveness and certainly reconciliation after this kind of horrific evil cannot be possible... Can it?

2) 2000 years ago, in Palestine, a healer, a preacher and one some believed was the messiah-King appointed by God to save the people from oppression, was executed by physical mutilation on a wooden cross. The goal was to crush any hopes in him being who his followers claimed he was. But within days of his execution, some women of his group and then some male disciples claimed that he was alive again, the same person... different yet the same. And not only that. They claimed that his resurrection proved that he was the messiah King appointed by God... and more. He was God in the flesh because this was the way God would save the people from what most deeply oppressed them – the enemy within. The resurrection of this man from the dead meant that a gateway to the most comprehensive liberation and transformation was opened up through the indestructible power of love working in the world.

OK, But who would believe that? Resurrection from the dead, that is; who can believe that? How can the resurrection of a man executed in the most horrible of ways be possible? How

can God be present in a crucified peasant? How can love truly win when it is crushed again and again by hate, violence, suffering, illness and despair?...

3) Many experts said it was a matter of time – a massive pandemic that would afflict thousands, if not hundreds of thousands. But people just lived as we've always lived – consuming, spending, travelling, expanding the carbon footprint and the movement of all kinds of goods and services... So here we are. We have no choice but to endure it, to hold our breath as we try to manage as best we can, following the rules getting ever stricter so we can 'plank' the curve... We're better here in Canada than most places in the world, and yet, even here... So what do we do when it's all over? Will anything change? Let's be real. Things will go back to the way they were until it happens again or something worse maybe. Most people want minimal disruption in their lives. We want to be as free as possible to be and do and not have to think about our negative impact on this planet and on each other. But is change possible, real change, impactful change? Can it happen?

OK, in order to open up space in us for some alternative thinking, feeling and maybe doing, let's seek out some revelatory guidance from our scripture reading for this Easter Sunday. And in this regard let me make two points:

First of all, Resurrection is not resuscitation. You can't pretend evil, pain and loss haven't happened. You can't bring back someone when they're actually dead. You can't pretend the world is not a scarier place for us all now. People are gone and they're not coming back. We can never feel safe collectively the same way. We can no longer just be individuals living our own lives in a particular part of the world as if others and the rest of the world don't exist and intersect with our lives in highly influential ways. And once we have witnessed genocidal cruelty and barbarity in real life, we can never pretend the world is not capable of producing such cruelty and barbarity again and again. No, if change is going to be real change, it cannot be resuscitation. It has to be resurrection.

Second, Resurrection is not restoration. Life can never go back to the way it was before what's happened has happened and is happening. If we're talking about forgiveness with justice it has to be a different kind of love than anything we've known before the cruelty and barbarity. If we're talking new life it has to be a different kind of life than one as vulnerable to being tossed about here and there without deeper roots and more enduring capacity. If we're talking about a decent future collectively for our planet then there has to be a different kind of commitment and responsibility for each other, for life and for our world as a whole. Restoration can never be enough. It has to be resurrection.

OK, preacher, so what is resurrection?

The male disciples ran to the tomb. They saw it was empty. They left. Mary, however, stayed. She lingered, weeping. She was absorbing the grief for what it was – evidence of a terrible loss. The more you love and the more you're invested, the more you grieve. But her investment and her grief placed her exactly where she needed to be for resurrection to be experienced firsthand. She saw Jesus. She heard Jesus. It made no sense. But she responded to what she experienced as very real. She then went on to live her life believing the resurrection was real and living as if it was real. The same happened to the other disciples. They grieved the loss, they absorbed Good Friday. And they were the ones to experience the resurrection through the gift of faith. They lived it out in becoming bold witnesses of the indestructible love of God that could still change the world.

Love gets crushed in a world of hate and violence. But it rises up again and again, in brave, new, ever more emboldened ways. It's the same love and yet it's different. It has to be different. It absorbs all the grief, loss and evil done and carries all that into a deeper and richer kind of love necessary to bless the world. Resurrection life carries the old life. We're still the same person. It also carries the wounds and scars. The losses are real and ever with us. The newness in Resurrection life is how the wounds, scars and losses become part of a newer, richer humanity that becomes us. It's how we learn and grow and become more compassionate and caring human beings with deeper roots in our capacity to endure, to listen and absorb the pain of others and to be a healing presence of love in ways that are different than anything we were able to offer before. Resurrection life is what the first witnesses encountered in Jesus. And the Spirit of this Jesus became the energy that fueled the movement that became Christianity.

So where is there evidence of this kind of resurrection life 2000 years later? Is resurrection possible today?

After being released from prison for murder, Nkundiye was housed in a village nearby the widow of the man he killed. And somehow they are friends – their children and grandchildren play and share lunch together. Their cows graze in the same field. "I am grateful to her," Nkundiye says of the widow – Laurencia Mukalemera. "Ever since I apologized to her after prison life, confessing my crimes and asking her for forgiveness, she has accepted me. I even leave my children with her when I'm away." One thing both Laurencia and Nkundiye share is faith. Faith in God turned the act of confession for Nkundiye from a necessity and duty into one of heart-wrenching remorse. Faith in God turned the act of forgiveness for Laurencia into an act of personal liberation for her and a way of honouring her husband by refusing to let hate live in her heart.

And what about all of us here and now, in this season of Covid-19? Is resurrection possible, really possible? What would genuine new life look like? Maybe it would be about rethinking an economy built on consumption that destroys our planet. Maybe it's reinvesting in global

institutions and governments that focus on the welfare of all citizens, especially the most vulnerable rather than shareholders with the money and power. Maybe it's about us rethinking our collective lifestyle and global travel in ways that are sustainable for our planet. Maybe it's about us stepping out a little more from our individuality and isolation into meaningful relationships and communities of care and friendship. Maybe more of us will invest in the sacred core within us through ritual practices like worship and meditation within communities rather than isolating ourselves in our own self-absorbed worlds. Maybe we will all deepen in our commitment to justice and love and how these values mean something only in relationship to each other rather than concepts we throw around here and there.

What is happening to us is a wakeup call, but more, it is an invitation to resurrection, to have faith and hope in what's possible. We cannot afford to be cynics. There is enough evidence that resurrection is possible. Consider Nkundiye and Laurencia. What about you and me and our world, beginning with the world at our doorstep? Today, the season of Easter begins. Even as we are hidden in isolation, may the seeds of resurrection begin to grow in our hearts until they are fully formed as fruit to be shared...

Jesus Christ is Risen, He is risen indeed... . Hallelujah! Amen.