

JUSTICE, FORGIVENESS, PEACE, RESURRECTION

Luke 24: 1-12. Acts 10: 34-43

What's wrong with our world right now? We know there are some crazy people out there, and especially some who are in positions of power. But people in power also have groups of people who support them. Even as many protest and struggle against what are clear violations of human rights and clear acts of injustice in many places of our world, there is still lots of support for those who are ready to retaliate, punish and crush those they deem as threats or enemies. Human rights are for those we see as living beings worthy of divine respect. If we believe some living being is not worthy of such respect, not even worthy of being alive, or worse, if we believe some living being is harmful to us or those we care about, we feel justified in destroying them and eradicating them from existence altogether.

And sadly, some people full of such hate, vengeance and disrespect for other life also claim their religion as supporting their zeal to destroy some part of God's creation. Well, on this Easter Sunday, I want to proclaim a very different gospel of resurrection and new life by getting to the heart of what Jesus, as God's love in the flesh, called us to live as the pathway to new life. Because the world today, as much as in Jesus' day, is so broken by hate, grief and revenge back and forth, there is no way for us to new life without the Good Friday confrontation with the real enemy in the world that can also be found in every human heart. Until each of us face what's possible and sometimes real in our hearts, we cannot be God's resurrection people in our world.

What am I talking about? Let me begin with a story, a difficult story of Good Friday and Easter Sunday lived out by a special woman named: Margot Van Sluytman. When Margot was 8 years old, her family emigrated to Canada from Guyana. They settled in Toronto. Like any immigrant family, they were building a life here. But something terribly tragic happened that totally shattered the family. Margot's father Theodore got a job at a Hudson's Bay store. One day there was an armed robbery. In an effort to talk to the gunman and talk him down, Theodore was shot and killed. The family fell apart. There was no longer a centre. Even as Margot's mother tried to care for the children as best she could, the trauma of a loss like this and in this way, broke the family apart. Within three months of her father's death, at age 16, Margot moved out of her home. Two years later she tried to take her life. Her mother rushed to the hospital to see her and told her this: I have lost Daddy, I can't lose you too."

Margot tried to rise up. But a combination of rage, grief, fear and angst kept her trapped in a prison within herself. She says that she felt a huge emptiness inside, an emptiness that was a darkness. Where was light to be found? Eventually, she found some hope in education. Somehow she completed an honours degree in English and Philosophy. She found love, got married and had two children. But with the demons of trauma swirling within her, the marriage fell apart. Margot began to write. She called it therapeutic writing. She even published poetry. She was invited to teach. She received awards. She

started her own publishing press. But even as she was helping other people, the darkness within Margot continued to remain.

But here's where things took a huge turn for Margot. After receiving another award, she was notified that her publishing press had received a large donation. After some checking as to where the donation came from, Margot was shocked to learn that it came from the wife of her father's killer! How could this be?! Evidently, her father's killer had been released from prison after 15 years, and in that time he had sought to change his life and make amends to his victims. The man's name was Glen. Margot immediately contacted Glen's wife and asked whether Glen would be prepared to offer an apology to Margot and her family. Glen said: 'yes.' Wow! Ok! So what happened next?

Before we get to the rest of Margot's story, let's ponder our scripture readings for this Easter Sunday morning. Thankfully most of us will never have gone through an experience like Margot's, but all of us know what pain and hurt are about and the challenge of forgiveness as more than a word; forgiveness as a way... Forgiveness has to include justice and forgiveness has to lead to peace. Is this ever really possible when the hurt is deep and the consequences irreversible?

Our first reading is an account of that first Easter Sunday morning. In all the accounts, it is the women disciples of Jesus who are at the tomb first. They are there with their burial spices to care for Jesus' body as this is the first opportunity to fulfill this important ritual and process for burial after the Sabbath. Also in all the accounts, when the women arrive, they find Jesus' body missing. What has happened? Has the body been moved or stolen? How awful! But in each account, the women also encounter one or two persons who give them critical information. They must be angels. Who else would know these things to say them. They say that Jesus' body is missing because he has risen, he is alive! And not only that. They will see him soon!

But how is this possible? Sure Jesus said he would rise again, but this is well beyond anything any human being could imagine. How could Jesus so brutally tortured and killed, so badly mutilated, rise up and be alive? In their shock and astonishment the women run away to tell the other disciples. Understandably, the first response they receive is disbelief. Even as they speak words of what they've been told disbelieving it themselves, other disciples who haven't been there think this is a joke and a bad joke at that! Have the women been hallucinating? What's going on?

Well, here the accounts begin to vary. But in all of them, Peter is among those first to go to the tomb to have a look for himself. In Luke's account, it is only Peter. Now remember, Peter is also the one who ran away when Jesus was being questioned. Even as he made great claims for himself and promises to Jesus, namely that he would stand by Jesus whatever happened, in the end Peter not only abandons Jesus in fear, but he even denies he has anything to do with Jesus. Wow! We're told that when Peter remembers all he had promised and claimed against his denial, he runs away and breaks down weeping bitterly with shame and regret.

And here is Peter now, after Jesus has died, coming to the tomb with all his shame, regret and complicated grief... And what does he see? An empty tomb. What can this mean?

Well, we know something of what happens in the days, weeks, months and years to come. Somehow, Peter and the other disciples do encounter Jesus in some way. The stories they tell describe such encounters as embodied encounters. Jesus is the same person because he has deep scars to prove it. But he's also different, obviously. How could anyone be the same after suffering such massive shocks to the body, let alone the mind and spirit. And yet, Jesus is alive and they all celebrate this together. But even more than that. They are reconstituted as disciples, and they are now called to be apostles - those who are sent out in the power of Jesus' Spirit to continue his healing, transforming work. As Jesus has risen from the dead, they too are called to rise up from their pain, fear, guilt, hurt and grief... They have been forgiven and in the peace of that forgiveness they are called to go and proclaim the justice of God to the world.

The justice of God... This is not about punishment or retaliation. No. The justice of God is about the way to peace through forgiveness requiring accountability and surrender to love. That's it. The justice of God is about finding peace through a forgiveness that requires accountability and surrender to love. We cannot redo the past or change it. But we can move forward in a new way. Accountability means we can only move forward after fully engaging the wrongs, the hurts and the people affected by our actions. Forgiveness means we are given the chance, in grace, to move forward toward healing and peace.

And this is exactly what Peter tells the crowd that has gathered to hear him speak many months after that first Easter Sunday morning. Just before Peter gives this sermon, the story in Acts tells us that Peter the Jew has just welcomed non-Jews into the fellowship. But more than that. Peter has welcomed a Roman military officer named Cornelius and his whole family. In the real world this Roman soldier is the worst enemy of the Jewish people. How can there be any peace between a Jew and a Roman military officer? And yet Peter knows what has happened to him who abandoned, denied and ran away from Jesus himself and how he was welcomed back. How could he then not open his heart to one who would have been his enemy?

You see how it works? Only as we see this journey to peace through our own forgiveness received, do we come to understand that true justice has to include forgiveness as much as accountability as the pathway to peace. Isn't this so relevant for our world today as much as it was for Peter's world 2000 years ago? Who among our nations does not have need to be accountable in some way? Who does not need forgiveness for sins and genocidal atrocities committed directly through what's been done as much as what has failed to be done? We need a justice that is not built on punishment or retaliation, a justice that keeps calling for accountability, but always with the promise and goal of forgiveness towards a new path to peace... And what is true for our collective path as people and nations, is also true for our own personal lives.

So what about Margot. How did justice for her become the justice of God? Margot began corresponding with her father's killer: Glen, directly. She says that this correspondence was "filled with humanity. His words helped to heal me." But after a while she felt that words were not enough. They arranged to meet in person. And that first encounter was overwhelmingly powerful. After introducing themselves to each other, they began to sob and just hugged each other... Wow! They did more talking and more crying... Isn't this so much more powerful than the alternative - stewing in the anger, hate, grief and pain seeking ways to hit back anyway possible?...

And such a restorative encounter was the beginning of a new way forward for both Margot and Glen. They began to collaborate about working together to promote restorative justice, which for Margot, a Christian, is also the justice of God. There was a special word Glen introduced to Margot - *Sawbonna* - a Zulu word meaning: "I see you." To see each other past the hate and the hurt is to see each other in a humanity shared. Whatever we have done or failed to do, we are human beings created in God's image. The door is never closed unless we ourselves close it.

At first, Margot says, she hated the word forgiveness. It seemed too prescriptive - as something someone should do. But over time she realized forgiveness is much more a way of life, a way of being beginning with a receiving which only then becomes an authentic giving. Forgiveness also involves an accountability on all sides, and such accountability opens an opportunity for a new way of moving forward toward a genuine peace. And only out of such a journey can the promise of Easter, of new life and resurrection, mean something solid and real in our lives as much as in our world.

Well, but is this possible? Is it likely? In our world as we see it today?... It's easy to feel discouraged in our Good Fridays. It's much harder to trust and hope that love will never be extinguished and will find a way to rise up again and again to overcome the hate and indifference so afflicting our world. But such rising up must also begin with each and everyone of us, in our own lives and our own relationships. Will we be a beacon of love and light shining out in the darkness of our world this Easter? May it be so.

Prayer: Come Holy Spirit of the risen Christ, and raise us up into forgiven, forgiving people who live out your justice in the world. Amen.