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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Y11
24
Easter Day 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 1 April 2018

Acts 10:34-43
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-
24
1 Cor. 15:1-11
Mark 16:1-8

Every Person We Ever Were

Alleluia. Christ is risen!

You are every person you have ever been from the moment you were born to now. This includes the openness to wonder of your five-year-old self, the simple enthusiasms you had at age ten, the gathering complexity of your teenaged aged years – every stage of your career and personal life.

I will always be the fourth grader with the broken arm, the high school student working at the lumberyard, the twenty-three year old bowled over by love, the youngest priest in the Diocese, and the awe-inspired new parent. These identities never leave you. They just get in the car and go along for the ride. The question for you this morning is: which of them is driving.

The rock star Bruce Springsteen points this out in his autobiography. His aunt had been killed as a child while riding her tricycle and his father grew up in a household still mourning this tragedy. Springsteen writes of his own childhood, "When my dad looked at me, he didn't see what he needed to see. This was my crime... He loved me but he couldn't stand me."¹

In his late twenties Springsteen writes that he had such a deep-seated anger that he could almost never feel at ease. He had no home, no family, no real life outside of performing. He felt depressed, afraid of love, of needing someone too much. Playing concerts provided him with, "the illusion of intimacy without risk or consequences."² Our lives have many interpreters besides ourselves.³ Is this story true? How would one know?

Our theme at Grace Cathedral this year is truth. We find ourselves at a moment of crisis for truth-telling. None of us can remember a time when our society held in such low esteem expertise in foreign policy, economics, government, law, journalism, science, etc. Technology is changing our experience of truth. Three years ago we didn't even realize that elections could be manipulated with social media. We hadn't heard of "fake news."

So together we are studying truth – the truth about ourselves, each other, the natural world and God. This morning we have before us the truth of Easter. I want to make three simple points.

1. First, truth begins with the facts. Truth is not a matter of tribal solidarity.⁴ Audrey Cooper the editor of the San Francisco Chronicle says that, “Nobody has a right to an uninformed opinion.” Today we hear claims that violent immigrants constitute a major threat to our society without facts to support this fear. We hear that more guns will make us safer. We are told that participating in global climate treaties will harm the economy.

But the fact is, the planet is getting hotter. Our tax code increases inequality. It is a fact that on March 18 Stephon Clark was shot by police in Sacramento. He was hit by eight bullets, six of them in his back. We always need to begin with facts.

At the same time we cannot simply end with the facts. Facts do not do all the work by themselves. Ken Wilbur (1949-) writes, “Surfaces can be seen, but depths must be interpreted.”⁵ This is especially true of the Bible.

If I told you that at a meeting they were “kicking him while he was down,” you might ask, “do you mean that literally?” But this distinction between literal and metaphorical makes no sense when it comes to the whole Bible. There is no “literal” meaning to the Bible. There is no “default” meaning. It always has to be interpreted. In this sense it is impossible to take the Bible literally.

The Bible presents us with facts. Many in Ancient Israel expected a Messiah-King to rise up, to defeat the occupying Roman army and to establish an era of justice. No one at the time could imagine the far more radical idea that god would be crucified for us and rise again.⁶

Very early on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome come to the tomb. They see a young man who frightens them so profoundly that they are utterly silenced. In Greek the two words are related and next to each other. Greek uses double negatives so literally “they tell no one nothing.”

The angel says, do not be alarmed. But they are seized by tremors or trembling and by ekstasis, the amazement related to our word for ecstasy. They are standing outside of themselves when he says, “go, tell Jesus’ disciples... that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you” (Mk. 16).

For me Galilee is a bit like Vacaville or Lodi. It is the ordinary place where ordinary people have a sense for the ongoing presence of Jesus. Today, twenty centuries later, two billion Christians have this experience of Jesus. When we suffer and when we rejoice, Jesus brings us to God. In one way or other Jesus brought us here together in joy this morning.

Last night sixteen adults were baptized at our Easter Vigil service. Their average age was probably about 27. At midnight they came up to the altar. During the blessing you could see the tears in their eyes. Jesus was here! Jesus *is* here.

2. My second point is that truth is social not private. We share this existence. A friend of mine says that the world is a wedding and we are all betrothed to each other.⁷ This Wednesday will be the fiftieth anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s (1929-1968) martyrdom. Reading his biography as a young man gave me a picture of a scholar, pastor, and activist that I had never before imagined. He inspired me to dedicate my life to this path, to studying the philosophers and theologians King loved.

This scholarship has given me an appreciation for King's "personalism," his sense that God is not merely the creative force that sustains the universe, but a person that we meet in our prayers and worship. When his house was bombed, his friends killed and his life threatened, the person of Jesus gave King miraculous courage and strength. In the face of virulent racism and hatred God kept him focused on love. King insisted that our concern should never be limited just to people like ourselves. As a result he spoke out not just about race, but poverty, colonialism, the Vietnam War and the environment.

On March 28, 1965 King stood in this pulpit and spoke to overflowing crowds of 5000 people. He said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." He said, "All life is interrelated. And we are caught in an inescapable web of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects us all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be, until you are what you ought to be."⁸

3. Finally, Easter truth is personal. For Christians truth is not something that happened a long time ago. Truth is not even chiefly about the Bible. It is about a person, the person of Jesus. The truth of the resurrection is not about dead bodies coming to life. It is not even primarily about what will happen after we die. It is the truth of God's power over death and sin, that God overcomes the tragedy that we call ordinary reality.

This week as I rushed around town worrying about being late and whether I would get everything done, I found myself on Fulton along the border of Golden Gate Park. Suddenly I saw the most spectacular cherry tree in full blossom. It felt like God had just

handed me a bouquet of flowers and said, "you look like you need these." In that moment of self-forgetfulness a larger truth came to me. This all has to do with love. The philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch (1919-1999) writes that love, "is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real."⁹

The playwright Arthur Miller (1915-2005) wrote about a particularly difficult time for his wife the actress Marilyn Monroe (1926-1962) as she suffered from depression, paranoia and heavy barbiturate use. One night watching over her drugged sleep he thought, "I found myself straining to imagine miracles. What if she were to wake up and I were to say, 'God loves you, darling,' and she were able to believe it! How I wish I still had my religion and she had hers."¹⁰

What is the truth? What is the truth about Marilyn Monroe or Bruce Springsteen or Martin Luther King, Jr., or Stephon Clark? What is the truth about you and me? I believe that, "God loves you, darling" might be it. For me this truth lies at the very heart of reality.

The truth of Easter begins with the facts. No one can know for sure what happened that morning before the women arrived at the tomb. But two billion people today experience Jesus going ahead of us in our ordinary life.

Easter is the truth of the "inescapable web of mutuality." In God death and sin do not have the last word. Nothing good is lost forever. Easter is the insight that the most powerful truths are personal. The self-forgetfulness we experience in love opens the door out of our conflicted inner life into reality.

You are every person you have ever been since the moment you were born. These identities never leave you. They just get in the car and go along for the ride. This Easter what would it be like to wake up to God's love? What if we let our most Christ-inspired self do the driving. God loves you darling.

¹ Bruce Springsteen, *Born to Run* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2016) 265, 28, 29.

² *Ibid.*, 270-2.

³ Alan Jones, *Living the Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2000) 93.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17

⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶ Jon Meacham, "Jesus Died Only to Rise Again, Where Did the Concept of the Resurrection Come from?" *The New York Times*, 30 March 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/30/books/review/resurrection-jesus.html>

⁷ Alan Jones, *Living the Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2000) 100.

⁸ Martin Luther King, Grace Cathedral Sermon, 28 March 1965. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=so8kSH8lwIA&t=387s>.

On the day before King's death he talked about threats that had been made to his life. He said, "I would like to live a long life. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me up to the mountain... And I've seen the promised land. And I may not get there with you... [but] the brotherhood of man will become a reality." Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (NY: Harper & Row, 1982) 467.

⁹ Alan Jones, *Living the Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2000) 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.