

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter, April 11, 2010
Lessons: Isaiah 65:16-25, Revelation 22:1-2, and John 10:10-11

RESURRECTION HOPE: A NEW WAY OF SEEING THIS WORLD

My overall question for this and the remaining five Sundays of Easter is, *What difference does Jesus' resurrection make for us here and now?* The apostle Paul teaches that we experience the resurrection as hope and the power of hope to transform people and their lives, and we who continue to live on this side of Easter, where death still takes all the living, can have the nature, direction, and quality of our lives and our very souls, our own unique selves, transformed by that hope. Our Easter affirmation, "He is risen! He lives!" changes everything, *but how?* That is the question.

The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann speaks of a partnership between the LORD God and the creation — not just human beings, but the whole created order. Brueggemann sees, not only around him, but also in the Bible that it is the nature of nature to be generative — to keep generating life in amazing abundance. Seeing this abundant generation of life as the intention and blessing of God, he argues that we need a better outlook to counter the negative and destructive view that has prevailed throughout human history and is now reaching its extreme in our modern industrial and technological societies. Our choice of overview fosters our attitudes toward daily living and toward the overall direction and meaning of our lives themselves and our relations with other people and with the natural world. The choice Brueggemann sees is between an overview of *scarcity* and one of *abundance* based upon the generosity of God, upon God's delight in providing for life.

So great is this contrast that Brueggemann even titles a subsection, "Limitless Generosity as Root of Reality." Wow. The root of what people call reality in our world is the belief that, *There is never enough for everyone, and so I have to make sure I get all I can for myself and my family.* That is the doctrine of scarcity that pits us against each other in the competition of life. The same thinking extends to my group, my kind of people, and my country. Brueggemann comments:

At the root of reality is a limitless generosity that intends an extravagant abundance. . . . This insistence flies in the face of the theory of scarcity on which the modern world is built. An ideology of scarcity produces a competitiveness that issues in brutality, justifies policies of wars and aggression, authorizes an acute individualism, and provides

endless anxiety about money, sexuality, physical fitness, beauty, work achievements, and finally mortality.

Jesus asks us why we worry about what we will eat or drink, what we will wear, or how we will provide for our future. To our minds, he must be joking. What is human life but anxiety about tomorrow? What is success but taking more from life's scarce resources so we can amass enough to enjoy luxuries and still be virtuous by giving charity to those left behind in the competition of life? If we were to be honest, we would have to admit that in most of his teachings Jesus sounds naive. "Don't worry about tomorrow"? Consider the flowers and the birds that God provides for, and let go of our anxieties about prospering? Is he crazy? Or does he see something we don't and trust something we won't even consider? Christianity, I'm afraid, has had far more to say about trusting God for eternal life in heaven, which we can't take for ourselves anyway, than about trusting God for life on this side of the grave.

We need, however, to avoid polarizing our choices in simplistic ways designed to make faith look foolish or else to act foolishly. The message is not, *Sit back, do nothing, and God will give you health, wealth, and long life — and heaven, too.* No, we don't have a tree of life growing in our backyards, and God has not made us to sit around and be lazy or to be wasteful and care-less with what we call the "resources" of nature. We are the responsible creature, the steward of God's creation, the care-taker of God's world. We cannot afford to be lazy about our work or lazy in our thinking. But neither can we afford simply to ignore Jesus' take on life, his overview of abundance based upon trust in God's generosity.

We make a choice here and now that provides the context for many smaller choices day by day. We choose between taking and sharing as our way of life. Are the good things of life to be taken by the strong and clever, or are those good things to be received thankfully from God and shared among us, trusting there will be enough for all? We have built our modern systems on the assumption that there is not enough for all, so that many must lose so some can win. We cannot solve problems together, because we not together.

Let's listen to the voice of objection that calls itself realistic. If I am willing to be generous, are there not plenty of people more than willing to take all I have? Leave the door open, and the thief will enter and steal. But do we not see that the thief lives by the same doctrine of scarcity that drives our systems of wealth? Losers steal. Winners take far more of life's good things, but legally. Against this very reality we have created, but with compassion for the people caught in its grip, Jesus Christ calls us to an alternative outlook on life: to share life's goods in a world of competitive taking, to trust enough to enable a spirit of generosity in a world of suspicion and hoarding, and to enjoy life as God's gift in the midst of a world killing itself with fear, greed, and anxiety.

Isaiah and Revelation offer us visions of the new creation that Easter announces has now begun with Jesus' resurrection. Both lessons call us to trust God and so begin living already with an overview of abundance based upon God's extravagant generosity. God wants the healing of the nations, which cannot possibly come about as long as the overview of scarcity and all the fighting over land and goods prevail. God wants people to enjoy their lives and be thankful to be alive. Do we realize what a prayer that is, that everyone in our communities and our world might be enabled to be thankful to be living? That's become, recently, my prayer for the seriously ill — that they be given life they are thankful to be living. We have not reached the new creation where all sickness is cured, where death no longer comes and all griefs and hurts are healed and forgotten. Thanks be to God, we can live here and now in the resurrection hope that empowers us to trust God in life and in death.

Jesus says the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. Who is this thief? I am not saying the image has only one application. Surely it represents anyone and anything that promises life and abundance but comes only to take for itself, but does it not, then, also represent that overview of life that glorifies taking for oneself? Is what Brueggemann describes as the *ideology of scarcity* not a great thief that poisons and corrupts all human interactions in this world? As long as I believe there is not enough for you and me both, for yours and mine, for them and us, I will not fully escape the clutches of the thief who comes only to steal and kill and destroy.

The resurrection hope God has given us in Christ provides us with a new spirit. Earth is no longer for us a warehouse of resources to use up before somebody else gets the chance. People are no longer resources to be used for productivity but neighbors and sisters and brothers. I have been told that in England they now evaluate their schools by "value added to the unit." Do you know what that weird phrase means? It means educating a child, the "unit" to which value is added for productivity. The ideology of competition for scarce resources dehumanizes all of us. Contrasting himself with the thief, Jesus says, "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly." "Give," he says, "and it will be given to you; a full measure pressed down and shaken together will be poured into your lap." Do we believe him? Can we trust God that much? I know this view is hard to accept – for me, for anyone living in our modern world. It goes against our understanding and experience of life. But it is Jesus' way. Can he change our minds about the very nature of life and God's creation, maybe a little at a time? If so, I believe we will feel it inside us, as suspicion of other people and anxiety about tomorrow begin to drain from our spirits and we breathe more deeply the fresh air of hope, thankfulness, generosity, and shared freedom. Life is not about winners and losers; life is about people loved by their Creator and Redeemer God, all of us. Amen.