

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“What Now?”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
Easter Sunday, April 5, 2015

Isaiah 40:27-31, Luke 24:1-12

It all began on the roof of a drive-in theatre in Orange County, California. In the year of my birth, 1955, a little know minister named Robert Schuller, started preaching to people parked in their cars. Over the years he assumed the mantle of Norman Vincent Peale and built one of the nation’s first mega-churches, the Crystal Cathedral. However, as happens with most people I know Dr. Schuller began to grow older. As he entered his 80s he realized that he needed to pass on the church to someone else...and so he chose one of his sons. To put it mildly the transition did not go well. Attendance, membership and contributions fell. So Dr. Schuller removed his son and replaced them with his daughter. Things continued to decline. Fearing utter collapse, the board not only removed Dr. Schuller from the pastorate, but Dr. Schuller himself from the board. They then replaced the daughter with another one of Dr. Schuller’s sons...see the pattern. In the end it did not matter. The church declared bankruptcy and people realized that the Cathedral and the Hour of Power television ministry could not survive without its founder. It was a one man show.

We might imagine that this was the way the disciples felt. For three years they had followed Jesus everywhere. They had given up everything. They had risked everything. But it had been worth it. Following Jesus was an amazing adventure. He worked miracles. He healed people. He drive out demons. He taught with authority. He drew large crowds. And in their eyes he was the messiah who would restore Israel to its rightful place as God’s kingdom on earth. His sudden arrest, trial and death changed all of that. It ended a revolution that had begun with such promise. The disciples ran away. They hid. They went back home. No one could be Jesus. No one could do what he did. And so on the day after the Sabbath the women returned to the place of his burial filled with sadness and defeat. All of which poses the question, why are we here some 2,000 years later, if Jesus is not here with us. I know, you are all thinking, “Uh John, you know...the resurrection and all. Jesus was raised from the dead.” And I get that. The women would discover that Jesus was no longer in the tomb, but had been raised by the power of God. Again, I get that, but the reality is that Jesus is not around now. He came back and then left again, just as Schuller had done. So again, why are we here some 2,000 years later?

The answer I want to offer you is that we are here because the resurrection was not simply an event in one moment in time. For years this is how people talked about it...or argued about it. Did Jesus really rise? How did it happen? In a sense they were looking for some sort of proof that one moment Jesus was dead and the next he was alive. What I want to argue is that the resurrection was bigger than that. Yes, one moment Jesus was dead and another he was alive, but that was the initiation of something greater...the continuing expansion of the resurrection into the world. How many of you this morning are familiar with the Big Bang Theory...not the television show, but the actual Big Bang at the beginning of the universe? Well if you are not the best scientific observations take us back almost 14 billion years where there was a singularity which exploded in a massive event that created

temperatures of almost 10 billion degrees. That even then sent matter flying throughout the universe in such a way as to create all that we see today...and it is not done. The universe continues to expand even as we sit here in this sanctuary.

This is for me the best picture of the resurrection. The resurrection begins as a singular event. It happens in real time, in an actual moment. But it is not contained in that moment. Through the power of the Spirit the resurrection's impact moves first to the women, then the disciples and then to the church and the world. The power of the resurrection begins to change everything. It changes people. It changes communities. It changes empires. In a sense what the resurrection does is that it brings Isaiah's words to life. The portion of Isaiah we read this morning was written to a people who had been defeated, carried into exile and were now returning home to a difficult and dangerous place. They had lost all hope. They wondered if their God had forgotten them. But Isaiah writes that not only had God not forgotten them but that God will give power to the faint and will strengthen the powerless. Even when the best and most in-shape fall down, those who wait on God; those who trust in God will mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not be faint. This is what the power of the resurrection does. It offers to all people the possibility of new life and new power not simply in some future dimension of spiritual existence.

How does this work? I will tell you. A couple of weeks ago I went down to the Welcome Inn, where Jason Morgan works as director. The Welcome Inn is a day drop-in center for the homeless. It provides a warm place where people can come in off of the streets and get a meal and assistance in a variety of ways. I was there to get some video interviews of some of their guests. Their stories were all poignant and fascinating. But there was one woman whose story touched me more deeply. She is in her mid-sixties, and had been living with her new fiancé, in his house, for a number of years. She had had a heart attack, had open heart surgery and was recovering when her fiancé had a massive heart attack of his own and died. The fiancé's family forced her out of the house and on to the streets with nothing much more than the clothes on her back. When I heard her story I expected her to be bitter, but she was not. She said that through all of this she had not given up hope. I have to admit I wondered about that until when I was leaving I saw her holding the hands of a young man and praying that he too would find the hope that Jesus Christ can give.

That my friends is what the resurrection does. It is expanding like the universe, giving power and hope to all persons who are willing to take hold of it. In the best and worst of times, it changes us. It opens us to new possibilities. It gives us all we need to run and not be weary; to mount up with wings like eagles. The question is, will we do so; will we allow the ever expanding power of the resurrection to touch us as it is touching that woman at the Welcome Inn that we too might find the amazing hope that God offers. My challenge then is to ask, "How am I allowing the power of Jesus' resurrection to give me the strength I need to soar?"