

“Practicing Resurrection: As God’s Own People!”
 (1st of 4 on the Letter to the Ephesians)
 Delivered Sunday, May 1, 2011
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Ephesians 1:1-14

Will Willimon, longtime chaplain at Duke University and now Bishop in the United Methodist Church, remembers being asked by a newspaper reporter to comment on the meaning of Easter. In one of his books, he recounts the interview went something like this: “Dr. Willimon, what would you say is the goal of Easter?” “The goal of Easter?” I asked. “Yes,” the reporter persisted, “what is its point, its purpose? Why do you do it?” Caught off guard, by the language of the questioner, Willimon stammered a bit: “Well, we just do it. Easter is just, well it’s just Easter. We celebrate it ...” and suddenly a vision came, “I could see the headlines: Dean of Duke Chapel says Easter is pointless.” Then Willimon reflects on this odd interchange saying, “From the utilitarian, pragmatic, serious perspective of modern people, much that we Christians do seems pointless. Even Easter. We do it for the sheer fun of it. That – modern people may one day discover, just may be the point after all.” (1)

I think I understand why Will Willimon found himself at a loss for words. I am glad the church gets packed to the gills on Easter Sunday for the sheer fun of it! But for those of us who happen to be here on the Sunday after Easter, and the Sundays after that ... the meaning of the resurrection is so much a part of who we are as regular church-goers, to ask us what the point is – would be like asking a doctor to answer some question about the human body such as: What is the point of blood? What is the goal of the brain? What is the reason for a beating heart? You cannot answer such a question in a sound bite. The resurrection cannot be summed up as a “goal” or in a “purpose statement,” or as a “point” because the resurrection became the thing that was everything for the early church. Like a beating heart, the resurrection is what sustains our faith, and gives life to the church itself.

Eugene Peterson has said it this way: In a world in which death gets the biggest headlines: death of nations, death by war, death by murder, death by accident, obituaries without end, the church is an appointed gathering of people in particular places who practice a life of resurrection. The practice of resurrection is an intentional, deliberate decision to believe and participate in resurrection *life* – *life* out of death, life that trumps death, life that is the last word, Jesus’ life. By worship and the study of scripture, by prayer, confession and forgiveness, by welcoming the stranger and outcast, and by working for peace and justice ... the company of people who practice resurrection replicates the way of Jesus. This is the church.

Long before the gospel accounts of the Easter story even came to be written down, the word of Jesus’ resurrection brought new life to those who had believed in him. That word, passed from the women who went to the tomb and found it empty, to the disciples, to those who had hoped Jesus was the Messiah, to those who were

converted to believe him to be the raised Son of the Living God; that word simply told by one person to another – fueled a missionary movement that began to gather communities of Christians in homes. The house-churches were founded by these early believers and converts, and then nurtured in their life together by letters that circulated among them. We do not know who wrote this Letter to the Ephesians; while often attributed to Paul, it may have been written by one of Paul’s followers. But from the Acts of the Apostles, we do know that Paul stopped by the church at Ephesus, stayed for a number of months as the congregation was forming, and then he wrote letters to Timothy who was sent there to be pastor to the Ephesians. Close in content to Colossians, it is believed that this Letter to the Ephesians actually circulated among any number of first century congregations. (2)

Its dominant concern is to explore God’s glory through the resurrection of Jesus Christ which gives the church its core identity. The church is not what we choose to do. The church is what God does through us, while we participate in the resurrected life of Jesus himself. That’s what the word “church” actually means; it comes from the Greek word *ecclesia* which means “called out.” We are called out into the world to share the treasure of Jesus Christ wherever we go. And what a treasure he is.

In these opening verses of the Letter to the Ephesians, the writer begins by affirming God’s gift to the church in Jesus Christ, and what follows is one long, single sentence made up of 201 words. The subject of the sentence is God and then God is followed by seven incredibly active and descriptive verbs ... blessed, chose, destined, bestowed, lavished, made known, and gathered up. As God’s own, according to Ephesians, we are the objects of all those wonderful verbs: blessed, chosen, destined, bestowed, lavished, made known, and gathered up. God provides direction and purpose for each of our lives, as well as for our corporate witness in the local congregation and in the world.

At our best, the church bears witness to God and God’s goodness in Jesus Christ – by practicing resurrection – having hope in the worst of circumstances; sharing God’s love and compassion; and doing the work done by Jesus himself. We don’t do it perfectly and we don’t always exhibit to the world a Christ-like image. As Garrison Keillor has quipped, “You can become a Christian by going to church – about as easily as you can become a car by sleeping in a garage.” But by God’s grace the church exists – however imperfectly – to exhibit a life-giving Easter faith in and for the world.

United Methodist minister and frequent contributor to *The Christian Century*, Gregory Jones, has actually written a job description for church members and believers in the living Christ. These are wonderful words to keep in mind today as we ordain and install elders for a term of service on the session, but also they invite all of us to consider how we live out this vocation of practicing resurrection: WANTED: Persons for a vocation that leads God’s people in bearing witness to God’s new creation, revealed in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Work schedule is shaped by relationships, focusing on what is important in people’s lives, and depends on regular rhythms of work, rest and play. Compensation is shaped by mutual

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discernment of what is necessary in order for the persons and, where appropriate, their families, to have an appropriately well-lived life. The vocation involves cultivating holy dispositions, nurturing rigorous study of scripture, and shaping practices of faithful living in the church and in the world. Lifelong education and formation is expected in order to enable others also to grow in faith throughout their lives. Successful candidates will collaborate with others toward the same ends. These persons – with this vocation – report to God. (3)

That, my friends, is our job description, our common calling as Easter people. It is how we enact being : blessed, chosen, destined, bestowed, lavished, made known, and gathered up by God to practice resurrection.

AMEN.

NOTES

1) Willimon, *The Last Laugh*, p.1-16.

2) Eugene Peterson, *Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing up in Christ*, p. 12. Thanks to Peterson for the biblical insight on this letter throughout this series and also for this book which inspired it.

3) L. Gregory Jones, "Job Description," *The Christian Century*, January 10, 2006.