

“Brand New”

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April 7, 2019

Isaiah 43:16-21

Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

Philippians 3:7-12

... whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

Today's message is not so much a sermon as it is a reflection on my personal wrestlings with events of the week woven with thoughts on today's scriptures. It's unpolished, but I offer it humbly trusting that you can find in it a piece of our story and of God's call on your life.

When I got back to Wausau from Marshfield late Friday afternoon, I put on dry socks and my hiking boot and drove to Monk Gardens. There I stomped around the gardens for an hour. Stomped on all the patches that had been ice and threatened my balance the week which were now only somewhat crunchable gray patches. Stomped, in impotence rather than in anger over the ways life plays out, over children shaved and lying in hospital beds. Stomped, not so much asking the "Why?" question that has no good answer but crying out internally, "This is hard!"

We might wonder about our Isaiah lesson, where first God reminds the people of her mighty acts, but then says "Forget all that." We might puzzle about what this is about. To give you some context, this part of Isaiah was written after the announcement of Babylon's defeat to the Persians – Babylon which generations before had conquered Israel then taken its leaders into exile. Israel is anticipating freedom and the return of their leaders. Into this world of new possibilities, God speaks of leading the people from bondage and into God's promise.

Usually, I would speak of this as restoration. Last week, I talked about God making things new. But another way to say this is that God is practicing resurrection.

God practices resurrection whenever life is at its hardest, or hope is lost. Like during the Egyptian exodus or after the Babylonian exile. Today's lesson reminds folks that when the people were tempted to go back to Egypt because the way seemed too challenging, God led them into new promise. Reminds them (and us) that God will do it again.

Let's think about this "Practicing Resurrection."

A few years ago the idea was popularized that anyone can master anything, with 10,000 hours of deliberate practice.¹ From the time he could hold a ball and through college, Vince deliberately practiced baseball. He got quite good and baseball became a part of him. For me, it's piano. For Kellyn, it's storytelling. You know what it is for you.

Deliberate practice is not occasional plinking at a violin or throwing a football. Deliberate practice demands total, whole-being focus and dedication. When you've given yourself in this way, you develop muscle memory. Not only that, you feel incomplete without that practice. And when you again do this one thing that you've mastered, it feels like coming home. That's *practice*.

Resurrection is the movement from death to life. God is always practicing resurrection. The people of Israel had faced death in Egypt and resurrection when God leads them safely through the sea and through their wilderness journey. Now God is readying them for another resurrection experience as they live in to what it means to be free of Babylonian rule.

We have all experienced death and resurrection. Sometimes the death we faced was our own or that of someone close to us. For others, it was a death of hopes or dreams or relationship or independence... And though we may not have thought of it in this way, as we come out the other side of whatever terrible experience we have faced, we are living into resurrection. Resurrection is God's action which leads us from death into new life.

As I stomped around the perimeter of the Gardens, I changed paths to walk by the pond. Something splashed into the water ahead of me. I noticed the wren's nest again, heard the crows calling. Life. A few healing tears fell.

My head down, I trudged on gradually beginning to notice my surroundings more, moss and some other short green things which names I don't know. I recalled the day before when someone had grouched about the absence of green. They want green trees! And yet around me, I was finding new life everywhere – in those low green things, in the songs of the chickadees and other birds but I couldn't identify, in the signs of the four-footed creatures of the gardens.

We have to be open, and ready, to notice the resurrection that is all around us. Sometimes we want to cling to the past. Like when the Sunday school rooms were all in use and the pews were filled. Last week, June said how she wished her granddaughter was still 3-years-old. But now they have great conversations and have fun baking together.

When have you experienced resurrection? It's easy to notice springtime or think of babies when we talk about new life. But it is more than that. God made a pastor out of me. Those of you who know me know how incredible that is. Where in your life has God created new life?

Sometimes Christians are called Easter People. Of course, this is about the Easter event of God raising Christ from the dead. But more than that, it is about God's resurrection action in every life, from before the experience that Isaiah is speaking of, through our lives, and infinitely into the future. And – this is important – as Christians, the thing we are supposed to practice – even more than basketball or golf, more than music or drawing, more Minecraft or Magic, or building ramps or knitting – is resurrection.

We practice resurrection as a church and as individuals all the time, or at least we should. Every time we pause in a moment of confession, we practice resurrection, releasing our being from the burden we have carried too long. Each time we share communion, we practice the movement toward new life. We come to the table hungering for God's acceptance and grace. And we leave replete, ready to face the days ahead in confidence the Christ goes with us.

Whenever we come to God in prayer, lifting to God's light the ones among us who are suffering, trusting that God who hears us – even we can't shape the words – we step out of a grave into a new reality. Each time we recommit ourselves to following after Christ, whenever we allow God as Spirit to so fill us that there's no room for pettiness or fear, we practice resurrection.

Whenever we regroup, whenever we allow someone a fresh start, whenever we begin again with Day 1, we are practicing resurrection.

This practice of resurrection is counterintuitive so we have to do it deliberately until it gradually sinks into our bones, until it begins to come naturally. Until finally, it feels like coming home.

Every person experiences situations that are hard to let go of. We can get derailed in our grief or illness. Anger, fear, and shame can keep us captive. We can forget that God wants good for all of God's children – even us.

We can get lost in our own wilderness journey, not because God abandons us but because we forget to look for signs of resurrection. We forget to allow ourselves to be resurrected. We forget that it's possible so we set up residence in the valley of death's shadow.

During these times, the muscle memory from having practiced walking from death into new life is essential. During these times, taking the walks in nature, letting scriptures like today's speak to you, gathering with your people, whatever it is that jumpstarts you and reminds you of God's promise for new life is vital. Paul writes that he wants to know the power of Christ's resurrection. He doesn't mean *know* intellectually. He means that he wants to live into it. That's what he wants for his readers – and for us.

Before we can embrace God's resurrection promise for us, we need to know what holds us back. That answer is different for each of us. But we need to know so that we can let it go. Only then can we fully live into God's Easter promise for us.

Next week is Palm Sunday, when we walk with Jesus into Jerusalem and continue toward the cross – toward betrayal, crucifixion and at the last resurrection. In these dwindling days of Lent,

please, ponder what holds you back from practicing resurrection. What keeps you living in death's shadow? What do you need to let go of so that you can fully embrace God's offer of resurrection in your life?

Wrestle with that this week. And offer every thought or feeling that comes to you over to God. Prepare yourself in this way for God's new resurrection.

¹ K. Anders Ericsson, Ralf Th. Krampe, and Clemens Tesch-Romer, "The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance," 1993; later popularized by Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Little, Brown & Co., 2008.