

Hearing a New Story (Easter)

Scriptures: Isaiah 65: 17-25; Luke 24: 1-12

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I. Introduction

This week I spent a little bit of time waiting in a fairly long line at Walt Disney World with my son, Joshua, as we got ready for him to build a lightsaber. Now it's not like we don't already have some lightsabers at home already, but there is something about lightsabers -- and whatever they symbolize -- that is very compelling, particularly I guess for boys of frankly any age.

But I found myself thinking about that wonderful scene in the first *Star Wars* movie when Luke Skywalker is practicing for the first time with a lightsaber and Obi-Wan Kenobi is urging him to stop thinking about it and feel how the force is guiding him. So, he puts a mask over his eyes and he encourages Luke to sort of reach out, and when Luke has a little bit of success with this, he takes off his mask and he says, "You know, I think I did feel something." And Obi-Wan Kenobi says, "That's good. You've taken your first step into a larger world."

In part, that feeling is what Easter is all about. It is about God pulling back the blinders and inviting us to take a look into a bigger world. It's about looking beyond what feel like limitations and hopeless situations and despair and even death and saying there is something else there that you haven't been paying attention to. It's where God pulls back the blinders and allows us to see what the world is like in a different way; it's where God allows us to see who God is in a different way; and it's where God allows us to see who we are differently.

This is why Easter is our supreme holiday. It is our emancipation day when everything changes, when we are freed from all the bonds and bondages of this world, the bondage of scarcity and consumption, the bondage of violence and exploitation, the bondage of hatred and fear, and the day in which God invites us to live a new sort of life, a life of freedom and a life of love and a life of power. All of the Gospels, of course, center on this resurrection narrative and each of the Gospels tells it in a slightly different way.

II. Luke's Story

Now some have argued that the fact that the Gospels tell slightly different stories as undercutting the historicity of that narrative. I actually think exactly the opposite is true. And those of you in the congregation this morning who are attorneys or judges can probably attest to the fact that witnesses to any incident are highly likely to tell the story differently and with different details, right? So, I would actually be more suspicious of a series of Gospel narratives that told the story exactly the same way. I think the fact

that we've got some slightly different stories is a very powerful testimony to some differing recollections of the same central event.

Now in Luke's version we heard the story of this group of women -- and by the way, all of the Gospel writers agree that it was a group of women that were the first witnesses to the resurrection and were the first apostles to the apostles. So, a group of women goes to care for, they think, the body of their crucified teacher. And when they get to the tomb, they find the stone rolled away and nobody in it and they are met by two men in blazing white who asked them, "Why are you seeking the living among the dead? Do you not remember what he told you when he was in Galilee, about how the Son of Man would be given up to sinners and slain and rise in three days?"

This last line is unique to Luke's Gospel and for me resonated because it brought up all of those issues that we have been talking about throughout this Lenten series about how we listen and hear things. We talked about listening behind the words as we try to foster healthy dialogue with each other. Part of the context of this, of course, was an election cycle that is highly contentious and a church governance cycle, as we prepare for General Conference, that is highly contentious and looking at how do we engage in healthy conversation with one another, how do we hear what the other person is saying that might be behind the words, how do we become sensitive to how our own biases filter how we hear, how do we open up new places for conversation through the act of forgiveness and repentance, and how do we invite God into our dialogues?

So, this phrase that is in Luke's Gospel struck me because it's about how the disciples heard Jesus -- how Jesus was trying to prepare them for what was going to happen and how they were not at a place in their journey that they could understand what he was trying to say. Sometimes our ability to hear has more to do with where we are in our lives and what we are ready to hear than the words that are being spoken, and the women and the other disciples in Galilee weren't ready to hear what Jesus was trying to tell them. And even in this moment after they have just been through the shattering events of Holy Week leading up to the crucifixion, even then the disciples are still not ready to hear a new word as we heard in our text. But their view of the world is about to change dramatically because they're about to meet the Risen Christ and all of what they thought they understood about the world is going to get turned upside down.

III. The Resurrection Changes Everything

For the early Christians and the writers of the New Testament, the resurrection changes everything. Everything that they thought they knew about God, everything they thought they knew about the world, everything they thought they knew about who they were was about to get turned on its head and that resurrection narrative continues to turn our view of the world on its head to this day. Because after the resurrection, Jesus was no longer just a powerful teacher for them and for us.

They understood God doing something decisive in history that they hadn't ever seen or even conceptualize before. And, dear friends, that's still a hard message for us to hear because Jesus as teacher is firmly within our comfort zone. We like Jesus as teacher. He's a comforting figure. He gives us good advice that sometimes we even follow, right? But this new Jesus that we see on Easter Sunday is a different sort of character. From the New Testament's perspective, Jesus' teachings are secondary at best. The earliest writings of the New Testament, Paul's letters, don't talk about Jesus' teaching at all. All they talk about is what God has done decisively in our history through the power of the resurrection. All of the Gospel narratives are in movie terms "prequels" to the essential narrative of the New Testament, which is all about the resurrection power of God.

The New Testament authors wanted us to understand that Jesus' resurrection was not simply or only about a single man being raised from the dead, nor was it even simply a word of hope for us that there is life after death. What the New Testament wants us to understand is that in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, all of history has been transformed and redeemed and that this beautiful image of the end of the world from Isaiah where all of God's creatures would be gathered and living in harmony and peace together, that time has now started. Through the resurrection power of Christ, that new kingdom has broken into this world and we have the opportunity to live out of that new reality empowered by the Holy Spirit. Jesus then is not simply a teacher or a leader but becomes the first fruits, in Paul's language, the first example of what a new and expanded life looks like for all of us and that life beckons us forward from where we are.

IV. Making a Claim

I read a wonderful article on the *Wall Street Journal* yesterday by a Jesuit priest named James Martin. The article was called *The Challenge of Easter*, and he starts off noting that Easter as a holiday is as compared to Christmas, for example, remains wonderfully free of commercialism. And he hypothesizes that the reason for that is that the claim of Easter is so dramatic and counter-cultural that it has resisted what he calls "commodification," it has resisted becoming a commodity that can be sold to us, that the whole idea is so transformative it has remained a fundamentally religious event. And he, again echoing the New Testament authors, suggests that Jesus' teachings are authoritative and important for us not simply because they're good teachings, but because of who we now understand Christ to be. He writes, "If you believe that Jesus rose from the dead, everything changes. In that case," he says, "you cannot set aside any of his teachings because a person who rises from the grave, who demonstrates power over death and who has proven his divine authority needs to be listened to. What that person says demands a response. In short," Father Martin says, "resurrection makes a claim on you."

And, dear friends, I want to suggest that we are all gathered here this morning because on some level we all understand that the resurrection has made a claim on us. Maybe that was not a claim that we were ready to respond to, but we heard it like the

disciples in Galilee and now are starting to come to understand what that means. So, if this is your first time to Metropolitan or to church at all, I want to suggest that maybe what's happening there is a response to the claim that the resurrection has placed on your life. If you come here on a fairly regular basis and have largely been a participant at Sunday morning but haven't really taken the step to engage in some of the amazing missions and ministries of our church that are built at transforming our lives and pursuing justice in the world, maybe the call there is to deepen your journey and engage in some different kinds of ways in the life of the church and the church's life in the world. Or maybe you have been deeply involved in those ministries for a long time and there's a call on your life to move in a different direction. I don't know. We're all at different places in our journey. What I do know is as Father Martin says, "The resurrection today is making a claim on your life and that requires a response."

I want to suggest also that this is the place where a lot of that responding can happen here in the community of faith, whether it's here or in another location if you're visiting. That this is essentially where the Jedi training happens. Now we don't learn to move things with our mind, sadly, and we don't focus nearly enough time on lightsaber practice.

What we do though is learn about the dark side and how we engage in transforming a broken world. What we also start to realize as Luke Skywalker did under Yoda's tutelage is that often that dark side starts deep within me and that that transformation is made possible through the transforming love that Jesus Christ offers my life. But I want to invite you into a journey this morning wherever you are in your journey to allow the claim of the resurrection to take hold of you, to make whoever you are different and in that process make the world different.

V. Conclusion

As we more and more become channels of God's reconciling power in a broken and frayed world, it is always easy to leave church and go back right into our normal routine, a routine that is often dominated by the brokenness in which all of us live, a violent world that is in many places torn apart by hatred, an economic system that leaves whatever widening gap between the rich and the poor, and to sort of throw up our hands and say, "Well, this is just where we are." But the message of Easter Sunday is that's not just where we are. That's where we were. But now that Christ has been raised from the dead and that new world has broken in, we get to participate in that new world, we get to act out of that new power and authority that God has released through the resurrection for the transformation of us and all of the cosmos. That's the invitation today, to live a new and transformed life because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ so that walking out of the church today need never be the same and we need never be the same again.

Amen.