

April 19, 2015



“When Reality Changes Around Us”

Sermon by Rev. Larry Young

Luke 24:36b-48

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, ‘Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.’ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’ They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.’

As I began to reflect on my own experiences of changing reality which is today’s sermon theme, my mind went back to an incident in my dating life some 40+ years ago. One dating relationship had just ended; and as I was open to new possibilities, I was introduced to a young woman in the congregation whom I thought I could get interested in. And so we had our first date, and I found her warm and attractive, and saw this as a relationship that had a future. And then, just a few days later, she announced her engagement—and it wasn’t to me! I had no idea she was in another serious relationship—and apparently I was her last test run before she finally decided. Obviously the reality of my dating life had abruptly changed! And 40 years later I can say I’m glad that it did.

Our scripture readings today tell of incidents when the sense of reality abruptly changed for the people involved. Jesus had told his disciples that though he would be killed, he would rise again; but their minds couldn’t take it in. So when he was crucified, they concluded that was the end of the story. When the risen Jesus suddenly appears with them, they are startled and terrified, seeing him as a ghost. This is totally outside the picture of reality they have known. As they begin to realize that Jesus is not a ghost, think how this changes reality for them. The Jesus venture is for real! God is doing a new thing in human affairs, and they are being entrusted with launching the movement! Life now has new hope and new possibilities. For them it means accepting a great calling under God—and with it, great challenges. Their future couldn’t possibly look more different. And we are here in church today because they were able to embrace this new reality.

Similarly the temple crowd in Acts were confronted with a dramatic new reality when Peter and John pronounce God’s healing power on the crippled beggar—and he gets up and begins walking and leaping and praising God. In the minds of these eyewitnesses God didn’t act in such a miraculous way. But here they saw it happen. They were eyewitnesses to a new reality; and now they had to decide how they would respond.

Accepting the reality of God’s redemptive purpose for humanity is the supreme reality any of us can buy into; that’s what Easter faith comes down to. This is a reality we regard as eternal. Yet we know this doesn’t save us from having to face other changes in how we experience reality as we move through life. Change just seems to be one of the givens of life in our world; and how we deal with the changes has much to do with our success in finding the full and abundant life that Jesus is pointing us to.

Changes in our personal life situations are often the ones that impact us the most. We are all growing older; and at some point that begins to make a difference in what we can do and how we need to take care of ourselves. I’ve been blessed with good health all my life, and until recently I more or less assumed I would just keep on doing whatever I wanted to when I wanted to. Walking is an important component of my daily activity; but recently I’ve become aware I can walk only so far before my legs start to ache. I’m realizing I’m going to need to accept some limits on what I try to do physically.

Illness can be a major reality changer for us. We may find ourselves without our accustomed energy and optimism, having to care for our bodies in ways that change our whole lifestyle. The dreams and hopes we have for our future may need to change significantly. Some years ago Dear Abby published a column entitled “Welcome to Holland.” In it she describes a person who for years had had her heart set on going to Italy. She had bought her guidebooks and identified all the sights she wanted to see. But then when it’s time to go, she finds the plane of life lands her in Holland instead. Holland isn’t what she had bargained for! Holland is different, less flashy than Italy, slower-paced. But Holland has its attractions also—tulips, windmills, Rembrandts. And as much as she may mourn not getting to Italy, what matters is to not let that keep her from enjoying the very special and lovely things that Holland has to offer.

All kinds of personal life changes can dramatically alter the reality that shapes our lives—illness, aging, job losses, children moving out, the loss of loved ones, divorce, and whatever else may come our way. Generally these changes are not in our control; and the only question is how we will come to terms with them. Even if we find ourselves in Holland rather than someplace else we’d rather be, I believe God’s will is that we respond to them in such a way that makes for our well-being and blessing. The God of Easter is a God who cares for us more than we can know. Clearly God does not work to save us from these changes, but rather is with us to help us meet them in the most life-giving way possible. A time of change is a time to be particularly open to whatever leading and comfort God may have for us.

Changing social realities are one step removed from us compared to the personal changes we face; but we still need to deal with them, not only for our well-being but for the well-being of our society. The issue of the moment for us in California is the scarcity of water. It’s a jarring new reality when we’ve been used to keeping our lawns green and taking

leisurely showers. But there simply isn't going to be enough water to go around without some significant cutbacks on our part. And water shortage may well be just one manifestation of the larger issue of climate change which has serious implications for the whole world. This is not a reality that we are eager to face up to; yet the future of humanity literally hangs in the balance. Now you know why this is hard for us: we've gotten very comfortable with how life has been for us in the past; and more than anything we want to hang onto as much of that comfort as we can. So some try to deny that climate change is real so that they don't have to deal with it. But reality will have its way whether we accept it or not. And to be sure it's not just climate change we're facing but a whole raft of social changes that seem to be increasing exponentially: the digitalization of life, terrorist movements, economic changes, and changes in social mores, to name only a few. It's no wonder we may be tempted to crawl into our own cocoon and try to hide out from it all. I wonder if this tension may be a major factor behind the culture wars and the political divisiveness of our time. But I don't see God trying to shelter us from the reality of our world. God didn't ordain our social reality; God entrusted that to us. And now what God cares about is our making the best of this reality we've helped to shape. Our calling is not to hide from it but to engage it for the good of all to the best of our abilities, knowing that God is there with us in the process.

There's a third area of potential changing reality for most of us, and that's the reality of what we find spiritual truth to be. As we go through life, most of us find that our religious beliefs and values evolve in keeping with our spiritual development. The faith of a child is not adequate for adult life. And hopefully in our adult years we continue to grow in our sense of who God is to us and how religious teaching squares with our own experience of life. The "old time religion" that we may have learned earlier in life probably won't cut it in the face of our life today. And again I believe God is with us as our religious understanding progresses. Surely God wants to be known as fully and meaningfully as possible, and likewise God's truth for life. I'm convinced we show no disloyalty to God when we embrace new beliefs that square with our life experience. Even when we don't get it all right, God upholds us for trying to discern the truth.

This spring as we've been focusing on the theme of forgiveness, it has struck me that one of the hardest forms of forgiveness is forgiving ourselves. Some of us have grown up with the idea that there are some acts we can commit that are so heinous and evil that they are simply unforgivable. It's as though they put a stain on one's soul that is unremovable. I recently shared with the Partnership Class the story of the character Raskolnikov in Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment*. Raskolnikov had murdered a helpless woman pawnbroker in cold blood. He finds himself so overcome with guilt that he couldn't bear it alone—so he finds a young girl, Sonia, whom he confesses to. She in turn tells him that to put things right he must admit everything to the police, which he finally does. He is then sent to prison in Siberia. But as he is paying the penalty for his dastardly deed, he still cannot forgive himself. Instead he tries to find ways of excusing himself, by trying to blame his act on some decree of blind fate or trying to pretend his act was not really that bad. Yet deep inside he knows he is lying to himself. But all this time the young girl Sonia has stuck with him because she has come to care deeply for him. Raskolnikov could not ignore that fact. And one day out of the blue he finds himself weeping and throwing his arms around her knees, letting her love flow into him. And in that moment he realized he had forgiven himself. He was freed from his own judgment and thus freed to live without the stain of his past marring his future.

It may well take the love of another person to free us from whatever judgments we have made about ourselves. But however it happens, our God of unlimited forgiving love is surely there rejoicing with us for breaking through to this truth—and to all the truths of the spirit that are ours to claim.

Alix Brown has written a poetic meditation that expresses my faith in how God wants us to respond to life as it comes to us:

Did God create me—hard-wired in the womb—
to be just half of what I could become?
Did God create me . . . to fit into a first-century world or a twenty-first?
Did He create me not to use my brain, my mind,
to gather knowledge and understanding?
Did He create me to be bound by tribal practices or cultural codes
of societies long vanished?
Did God create His Word
to be unchanging, unchangeable, fixed for every time and place?
Did He set out, in stark, unbending prose,
the way we all should be?
Perhaps. But not my God.
My own belief: He gave us principles of love to live by.
Minds and brains to learn, to grow, to progress.
Spirit to respond to Him and all that He has made.
Bodies to work, to lean on and to love.
For the Word of God within us,
borne of the Spirit but tempered and forged by individual experience,
thanks be to God.

Thanks be to God who gives us the grace and courage to respond to all the changing realities of our lives and to find in them blessing, even as that blessing also accrues to others.