**SERMON Acts 5:25-32**

**Introduction**

This week, I was thinking about how the story of Jesus’ Resurrection, and all the stories we re-tell over Holy Week, still hold significance, and hope for us today. And I was reminded of an experience I had about 15 years ago, during the summer between my Junior and Senior Year of college. I spent about 10 weeks interviewing Northern Irish residents in government-subsidized housing. Specifically in Enniskillen, the town I went to Secondary School in. As a student of Geography and Cultural Studies, I was interested in how a recent cross-community project was working on the ground. Cross-community, in the Northern Ireland sense, is any effort made to build positive and peaceful relations between our two main voting blocs– nationalist (mainly Catholic) and unionist (mainly Protestant). Anyway, I was collecting information about how both participants and non-participants of this project perceived this recent initiative.

*[An aside]* I could talk for hours about some of the stories I heard that summer. Stories of violence, of fear, anger, grief, and distrust. I heard folks’ express skepticism and powerless-ness. These were people, disadvantaged economically and religiously and politically segregated, that all too often found themselves in the crosshairs of sectarian violence These people were intimately aware of the lasting effects of war and how messy peacebuilding can be. Many were weary and frustrated to be at the center of yet another project.

But in preparing for today sermon, Rita’s story stands out. She, by that stage in her late 70s, had seen more violence than you could ever imagine. And yet her hope for a different possible future was not extinguished. She told me of a time some years past, when a gang of paramilitary thugs entered her cul-de-sac of terraced houses, through a narrow alleyway in the middle of night. *She points out the window to the exact spot.* She describes how these groups would periodically come in, slash tires, throw rocks through resident’s windows, defecate in front yards, and light fires. *Rita shared all this while shaking her head, “It’s just so dangerous!”* She describes one particular night when an explosion went off, prematurely she suspected, and sent its courier flying backwards, leaving him unconscious on the ground outside her house. Rita said that she had watched the whole thing unfold from her upstairs bedroom window. And when the rest of the invading gang scattered, and she saw the young man lying, unmoving on the footpath, she told me that she grabbed the pillows off her own bed, ran downstairs and outside to place them under the young man’s head. The young man who had come into her neighborhood, prepared to bring destruction. *[pause]* When I asked Rita why she risked her own safety that night, she simply said, “It’s what I would want someone to do for my son.”

**Link**

Rita’s story is a resurrection story. And boy, does our world need more resurrection stories like that! Stories that remind us that though we may become weary of death, LIFE is still possible…even when it seems absurd. Even when it involves risk. We need stories of people, who despite desperate circumstances, still carry strength in their bones and in their spirits, to envision a brighter future. We need stories of wounded people, struggling people, who want to give up, and yet somehow, for some reason either find something within themselves…to risk love.

It struck me this week, that these kinds of stories, these resurrection stories are told and *more importantly lived* by Easter People. People that care amidst hostility, love while being hated, speak up against persistent silencing and see the possibility of LIFE when the forces of DEATH loom large.

This is what the story of Christs’ death and resurrection give us, gifts us.

Our series this Easter Season, “*Easter People, Raise Your Voices*,” will reflect on various stories of Easter People, throughout the book of Acts. People who reflect the reality and hope of the resurrection. People who are empowered by the absurd conviction that “Things don’t have to be the way they are!”

**Scriptural Context**

The passage David read for us today is part of a larger story of the apostles’ preaching in the city of Jerusalem (v12-16). This is an action that leads to a decision by the religious authorities to arrest them, because they’ve already been warned not to teach in Jesus’ name (v17-18). So, the high priest imprisons the apostles, but they are miraculously freed by an angel, and they continue their preaching until they are once again brought before the court. Peter leads the apostles in their defense, saying in verse 29, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

Now, in our time this verse has sometimes be pulled out to justify actions or decision made by a church or religious institution that are self-serving, discriminatory, or straight-up harmful for wider society. But, as I read it again this week, it was RITA’S story that flooded back into my memory. You see in her circumstance, human authority…or perhaps, human logic, instinct, human powers…would have said “Don’t get involved!” “Stay out of the street,” “He’s a criminal who wanted to harm you,” “He doesn’t deserve your compassion,” “You have a right to be angry,” and “No one would blame you if you left him to the consequences of his own actions.” AND YET…I believe Rita’s illogical, risky, loving actions obeyed a different authority, a higher moral or ethical code. Rita’s actions make perfect sense in a world where resurrection is possible. [pause]

When Peter says, “We must obey God rather than any human authority,” it’s important to look back a see again what the apostles were doing in the streets. We can go back to Acts chapter 2 verses 43-47, to find followers of the Way of Jesus sharing possessions, meeting the needs of the poorest among them, spend time together, made breaking bread a ritual. In chapter 3, they’re healing people outside the temple and in the streets, Peter’s message in one of good news for those who have been rejected from participating in religious gathering and rituals because of their status in society, sickness, or ethnic backgrounds. It’s these actions that Peter says are acts of obedience to God, to a higher power, to the Christ who was killed and yet rose again. It’s acts of healing, inclusion, and good news that the human authorities found threatening, disruptive and unwelcome.

**Series – Easter People**

Over the next 5 weeks we will read again how the story of Christ’s resurrection transformed the lives of ordinary people. It literally opened up possibilities that had never been considered before. Absurdly hopeful possibilities in a world where death was the end. It inspired a conviction amongst the apostles, that acts of healing and compassion were worth risking their own safety and freedom, because it meant that the sick and the oppressed would be healed and set free from the limitations placed on them by human authorities. You see Peter’s defense, to *obey God rather than human authority* isn’t some religious ‘get out of jail free card,’ to avoid the responsibility of living a life that honors Christ. It’s a way of describing a life that prioritizes the good news of justice and new life to those who suffer at the hand of oppressive human systems.

**Link**

In the coming weeks, we will encounter Saul who becomes Paul, Tabitha, Peter, Lydia, and the Jailer of Peter and Silas. These stories echo Rita’s. They witness to generosity amidst suffering, hope amidst struggle, and a persistence in showing love that is as absurd and brimming with as much hope, as the resurrection itself.

Easter People are people who live in ways that challange the status quo.

Easter People don’t just preach about the resurrection they practice resurrection.

Easter People demonstrate that they take seriously Jesus’ call to care for the least of these

and to make the kin-dom of God a reality here and now.

**Return to Scripture**

Peter’s statement in verses 30-31 is a powerful and poetic one. In the Roman empire where the state has existential power over its citizens, determining life and death, Peter declares that Jesus’ death, Jesus’ state-ordered-public-execution death, is not the final word. Instead, it is the pathway into new life that inspires and empowers the witness of Easter People. It is a reminder that Jesus’ kingdom is very unlike anything the apostles knew from the Greco-Roman world of the first century. It is a remind that there is a power greater than the coercive cycle of violence and dominance the Roman empire represented. And that power calls us to see and believe that life can come from death. beauty can come from brokenness and hope from despair.

Sometimes the practice of resurrection will mean that Easter People will occasionally run afoul of the powers-that-be; Human authorities that have a vested interested in the subservience and subjugation of certain sections of society.

But being Easter People, will sometimes necessitate –as Peter demonstrated– a kind of *resurrection activism*, acts of civil disobedience when human laws violate and deny human dignity, abundant life, and flourishing. And we have witnessed such actions even in our time. Be it in the protests for racial justice and against police brutality. We witnessed resurrection activism in work to increase access to quality healthcare and reproductive services. We are witnesses to resurrection activism in the continuing fight for equal rights for trans- and non-binary people. The promise of the resurrection is that a different way is possible, that there are more possibilities for human flourishing than our economic or political systems currently present.

Mitzi J. Smith, a Womanist Biblical Scholar, says that “God’s Peopleshould be agents of reversal.” Easter People should be agents of reversal. We are to embody good news to the poor, the imprisoned, and the oppressed. But as you know, human authorities are tempted by their own accumulation of power and fall short of this kin-dom vision. Even religious authorities and communities to whom we often submit *do not always* side with the oppressed or with justice. Human authorities sometimes allow themselves to be hijacked by their own -isms that stifle the message of the resurrection.

The Apostles’ refusal to stop talking about how God resurrected the executed body of Jesus, revealed a weakness in the system. For if death could not hold him down, our imaginations lead us to ask, “what else might be possible.

**Story – Cellist of Sarajevo/ Stories Ukraine**

There are glimpses of this kin-dom imagination in Easter people among us. And I just want to close with one more story.

You may have heard of the Steven Galloway novel *The Cellist of Sarajevo*. It’s based on the true story of Ve-dran Sma-il-ovic, a musician from Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the siege of Sarajevo in the early 90s (1992-1996). He played his cello in ruined buildings, and, often under the threat of snipers he played during funerals of folks killed in that conflict. What you may not know is that he eventually moved to Northern Ireland and continued work as a composer, conductor, and performer even amidst the conflict there. In the novel, inspired by his bravery, we meet three Sarajevan citizens who hear Sma-il-ovic play in the rubble-strewn streets, and how the simple beauty of the cellists’ music was power enough, to motivate them, to work toward a post-conflict future, to reclaim their own humanity amidst the savages of war, and remember that death doesn’t need to have the final word in Sarajevo either.

**Conclusion – Challenge and Hope**

Easter People, what vision, what hoped-for future, are you willing to risk it for? To fight for? To shape your life after. I pray that you will practice resurrection, live in ways that are provocative, that are bold in love and grace, and that witness to the quality of life that has been called forth because of the resurrection! Amen.