

Anticipation

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Reverend Heather Miner

After Easter, Resurrection Sunday, I always come back to the same question. Maybe it is because Monday comes so quickly and along with it, the regular routines. The glory of Resurrection gives way to the ordinary, to the brokenness of every day living. I'm left wondering, the very same question I struggled with during seminary, what has changed because of the Resurrection?

In seeking answer I'm often led to Paul who, I believe, pondered the same question, that he might explain to those who began the first Christian churches why, in light of the glory of Easter, they continued to be so broken.

In 49 CE all Jews and thus Jewish Christians were expelled out of Rome by Emperor Claudius. When Paul writes to the Romans, Nero has come to power and has allowed the Jews to return. When the Jewish Christians return, there are arguments between them and the Gentile Christians, those who weren't expelled and weren't beholden to Jewish ways. The Jewish Christians who have just returned from exile, having lost much for their faith, believed they were following God's command and these Gentiles, well they are, in a way, just posing. That is a difficult thing for Paul, who believes himself the apostle to the Gentiles, to hear. The time is between 54 and 63 CE...the reign of Nero.

In some ways, a lot had changed since the Resurrection of Jesus. New communities of faith had been born. Old communities of faith had found a new way. People were leaving behind the gods of Rome to worship the one true God. Jesus Christ, resurrected from the dead, is the proof that God exists, God cares, and God is powerful over all that is or was or will be.

It should be glorious, this sunrise of faith, a new day, a new world. Paul knew what it should be. He knew what Jesus had done for him. His personal transformation was begun on the Road to Damascus and deepened by those who taught him "the Way." Paul had not only been granted a personal vision but a seminary education. In both he had been given the

grace to glimpse the transformation God sought for him, the church, the world.

Having glimpsed what could be, how frustrating to see that even those who have been changed, called into faith through Jesus Christ, ... well even from the beginning, they didn't get along. Paul's letters are full of his attempts to stop the arguing, the pettiness that often seemed to get the best of the early Christian churches. Even he couldn't take it sometimes...remember...You foolish Galatians!"

It is this great distance between the vision God has given and the reality of what fills our days which causes ministers to fall back onto their own spirit, no matter how broken it is. It is this great distance seen even within a church community which causes those willing to consider God to turn away. Or for the critics to sit back, pointing fingers, calling the Christians hypocrites. It is this great distance that, at times, causes each one of us to stop leaning forward into the possibilities of God and settle back into the torn arm chair of our past.

This week, Virginia Tech experienced the rage of one who never leaned forward, who never believed in the possibilities of God. He never learned to respect God's possibilities, never sought them out, never bowed his knee to the one who could have made a difference. Instead the gunman went inside himself. There, he found only anger that led to death.

Today we mourn-- a high school valedictorian, a Lacrosse player, young people from India, Indonesia, Puerto Rico, and Peru, one ready to be a soldier, and another learning to be a diplomat. We mourn the loss of all these, of different ages and backgrounds, who were looking towards a bright future.

We call the gunman evil. We might even say that Satan entered in. Most assuredly, the gunman's soul was so marred, the image of God so blackened and blotted out, that the only possibility his flesh could see was to kill in order to get even with a world which caused him such pain.

Faith is inevitable, writes Henry Emerson Fosdick, "because we deal not only with a past that we may know and with a present which we can see, but with a future in whose possibilities we must believe."

While most of us will never know the complete darkness that took hold of the gunman, and while it is true that some can muddle through life without looking too far forward and thus keep a shell of sanity, Fosdick's argument rings true. For you who are thoughtful, who are willing to take risks for that which is only an idea, for you it rings true, that without a belief in God's possibilities, that is a possibility beyond your own making, your soul dies.

Unbelief is not a disease limited to a few whose interior chemistry is mixed a bit differently. Unbelief is the state into which our souls descend when the distance between the grace filled vision we once were given by God and our current reality seems too far to bridge. Unbelief enters when we give up on God's vision for us...

All too often we give up on God's vision for us...

But not Paul.

Where many of us adjust what we believe is God's plan to fit more with what we can see, Paul sets out the most grandiose plan of all and never wavers.

He boldly proclaims to the church in Rome: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God."

Here's Paul's argument from Romans in a nutshell: Creation waits with eager longing because, long ago, it was marred. All of creation was marred the day Adam and Eve were kicked out of the garden. Then the land became hard to till and thorns and briars grew up. These, along with other things, became to us signs of our unredeemed world.

For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

As Adam and Eve, the symbols of our humanity, rejected God, the image of God inside us became a mutilated mess. That God image became enslaved to the flesh. Creation itself became subject to futility, until that day we are

restored as children of God. On that day we, as children of God, we who bear God's untainted image, will restore the creation itself to its full glory even as we have been restored to glory.

Now that's hope!

For Paul, Christ's resurrection means that the process of our redemption, of all of creation's redemption, has begun. Paul describes it as labor. Like labor without an epidural, it is painful.

Yet the pain is tolerated, just as it is in birth, because of the anticipation of what is about to be born.

So even though, through baptism we have died to our old ways and risen with Christ that we might live by the Spirit, our redemption is not complete. We still live in bodies which seek something other than God. While we have caught a glimpse of God's glory, of what is to be born, too often there is something much more tangible in the way of that vision. It is so easy to give in. When the pain becomes too much, it is appealing to stop pushing towards the future, to let go of hope, to give away our joy.

Coach Vivian Stringer spoke about another college in the news for the wrong reasons. During a press conference, Coach Stringer spoke as the 10 young women on her team held back tears. She said, "We can't let other people steal our joy. We've understood that for a long time."

My friends, because of Jesus, because of the resurrection, we have the joy of knowing whose we are and whose spirit is at work in us. Romans 8:14..."all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God." We are on a winning team, whatever it may look like today. We can't let others, we can't let our lesser selves, steal our joy.

In Virginia Tech's stadium, a stadium filled with those grieving their loss of their friends, those who experienced the most fearful day of their lives, those who lost their sons and daughters, poet Laureate Nikki Giovanni, stood and spoke...the standing ovation that followed showed that her words broke through...filled the stadium with more than tears.

Speaking with only one lung intact, she recited: "We are strong and brave and innocent and unafraid. We are better than we think, not quite what we

want to be. We are alive to the imagination and the possibility we will continue to invent the future through our blood and tears, through all this sadness."

She gave voice to hope.

Brothers and Sisters,

Because we are alive in Christ, we are those who, like Paul, refuse to sit down, to settle down, to settle in, to settle for anything less than the pursuit of God's transformation...no--God's re-creation...of all the earth.

Because we are alive in Christ, we can work through our challenges, our failures, and our grief to invent the future.

Because we are alive in Christ, we can eagerly anticipate that future, as we lean expectantly into the possibilities of God.