

Eucatastrophe
Easter Sunday
April 8, 2007
John 20:1-29

My thanks to Betsy Russell for her encouragement of my writing which prompted this sermon.

Jennifer was my roommate during my freshman year of college. Jennifer was beautiful, olive skin and dark brown eyes. Her laughter was the merriest, funniest sound on the planet. Jennifer came from a spot on the map called Sandy Point, which is up close to the Virginia line. That means that Jennifer should have sounded like a reasonable Southerner with a gentle, lilting accent. For some reason Jennifer spoke with a crazy sounding, super strong accent. My people originate in the mountains of North Carolina and the foothills of South Carolina, but none of my relatives came near to the country Southern crazy dipping of words like Jennifer produced. In addition to her crazy accent, my roommate's prodigious hairspray habit also provided my brothers with all kinds of fodder for jokes. This is back in 1988, for those of you who remember that far back, 1988 still valued teased up bangs for a considerable portion of the population. Every night Jennifer washed her hair, dried it, and curled it with hot rollers. Every morning she curled her hair again with hot curlers and a curling iron. She bought industrial bottles of hairspray and used them up probably once every two weeks. Without a shadow of a doubt, Jennifer alone is responsible for a sizable hole in the ozone layer.

Jennifer and I were fond of each other and we ended our relationship on a good note, but we had our share of misunderstandings along the way. She was a good Methodist. Of course I was a good Baptist but we didn't hold these things against each other. One Sunday when we returned from our separate services, I came back into the dorm room singing one of the hymns that we sang in church. Except I wasn't singing it lover-ly, I was singing it Cantrell-style. On Sundays after church. When we cleaned up the dishes following the meal, the Cantrell children invariably sang our least favorite song of that morning's service. Really I shouldn't say that we sang. I should more accurately say that we butchered the music. We imitated the choir's soprano, we mocked the anthem, and we distorted the hymns. There's this version of "Jesus Paid It All" which, if you sing even just a line of it in front of any of the Cantrell children, we will break out into this rendition of the choir's rendition complete with hand motions, dance steps, and a featured soloist putting on the "I'm a serious Christian" face. I don't remember if my parents ever corrected us about this mockery. Probably they absolutely understood that it was all about preacher's kids blowing off much needed steam. Perhaps they simply didn't care. Not only was this permissible behavior, it was family culture. It was normal.

When my freshman year roommate, Jennifer, heard me butchering a hymn, she chastised me. She was really upset, too. She called me sacrilegious. I said "My Daddy never complained and he's a preacher." She said "My Daddy owns a store and if I did that to a hymn, he would give me a whoppin." A whopping is a whipping in normal parlance.] Lesson learned: what is harmless fun to one person is sacrilegious to another. What is hilarious and benign to one person is offensive and horrible to another. Better be careful.

How much more then should I be careful when I tell stories about belief and disbelief from the pulpit on Easter Sunday! Today, perhaps more so than even most of my sermons, I'm walking that fine line between that which I feel called to preach and that which I doubt that I'm called to preach because there's a little voice inside my head saying "You can't preach that. It's too inflammatory." For those of you who don't like how this sermon will start out, be patient. You'll definitely like where the sermon wraps up. For those of you who have wrestled with these same questions, perhaps you will be elated on this Easter Sunday to hear what I have to say. With that preface/ warning in mind, will you pray with me?

Gracious and Risen God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable unto you. Amen.

Growing up Baptist almost made the observance of Easter a superfluous thing. Baptists in my neck of the woods didn't follow the lectionary (never heard of it until I went to college) and we certainly didn't follow the church calendar. We didn't have paraments and vestments and candles. We didn't confine the observance of Christ's death and resurrection to one time in the course of the year. Baptists in my neck of the woods believed in a blood and guts Jesus. We focused on sin, guilt, and Jesus' pain for that sin. We sang hymns about Jesus dying and shedding his blood for our personal sins liberally throughout the entire year.

In the midst of this culture that emphasizes the centrality of Christ's atonement, it's not that hard

of a thing to believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ. A well indoctrinated child who is kept firmly in his or her faith by a strong religious culture can be impervious to the very rationale doubt- did the resurrection really happen? Of course the mind wanders there, but growing up the kind of Baptist I grew up, belief in the resurrection was easy. It was part of the landscape.

When I got to college, the faith of my youth started to choke me. My parents weren't fundamentalists. They weren't literalists. They didn't interrogate me to see if I went to church on Sunday, which I did gladly and voluntarily throughout my four years of college and every year since. It's just that certain things about my inherited faith stopped working. In fact these certain things started to hinder my faith. A belief in the physical resurrection of Christ was one of those hindrances. It was choking me. The Christian faith held me and compelled me, but the resurrection was choking me.

When belief in the resurrection began to threaten my ability to hold onto the rest of my faith, it unnerved me. It was a serious challenge to my faith. However, I never seriously considered discarding baby and bath water because my parents, who tolerated their children mangling hymns, set the best example of faith that I could ever possibly imagine. They allowed us to ask questions about God at home. They didn't get mad or defensive if the question was hard or skeptical. If they didn't know an answer, they said "I don't know." If they knew the answer and didn't especially like it, they would say things like "The Bible says this in one place, but it also says this in another place. Sometimes we can't always know exactly what God thinks about something." In other words my parents never equated faith with certainty. Nor did they equate doubt with faithlessness. My parents not only tolerated but respected honest, unflinching questions about faith when their children asked. They answered honestly, without defensiveness, and without arrogance. When I got stuck about the resurrection, I persevered and I found an answer I could manage.

During my junior year I was talking with another woman from my dorm. Her name was Margaret. Margaret attended Intersivity Christian Fellowship. I attended the Baptist Student Union. We respected each other for our mutual faith. Or, at least I thought that we did. One night Margaret and I were talking about the resurrection. I told her exactly what I believed at that time. I said "You know, I don't have to believe that Jesus actually lived, died, and came back from the grave to save me from my sins. It's enough for me to know that God loved me so much that it could have happened." Margaret looked at me square in the eyes and said "I'm surprised that you call yourself a Christian." Conversation over.

Margaret's words stung. Because I grew up in a Christian culture that tolerated doubt and dissent, I was unprepared for such a total rejection by another believer. At least four years later I told this story to a classmate of mine at Divinity School. Her name was Erin and she was from this denomination of which I wasn't then familiar-- the United Church of Christ. Once again I thought that it was clearly an acceptable intellectual idea for graduate students to entertain the notion that one can be a Christian and not believe in a literal resurrection of the body of Jesus. Erin totally sided with Margaret. Erin didn't see any sting in Margaret's words. She said "Margaret's right. I am surprised that you call yourself a Christian." That was twelve years ago. I don't think that I've told that story to anyone ever since.

I know that I'm treading on thin ice with some of you. Some of you agree absolutely with Margaret and Erin and Owen Meany. You believe that if a person doesn't believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, then that person is not a Christian. You might even believe that a person who believes this way is a soul in jeopardy of hell.

Well, I'm a Cantrell. We Cantrells don't freak over honest, unflinching questions about faith. We don't freeze in the face of doubt. We don't criticize or belittle when something less than an orthodox belief is expressed. We certainly don't immediately disqualify folks from the faith because their expression of belief (or disbelief) appears radically to challenge the standard norms of Christianity. From where I stand each Sunday, I see folks who believe the Bible happened literally or almost literally. I see some folks who believe that some things happened literally but not always. I see some folks who take the whole Bible stuff metaphorically. I see some folks who want to be part of this inclusive church experiment and who are compelled by certain aspects of the faith, but who are confused about Christ and by some of the claims in the Bible. We're scientific people who have substantial issues of critical disbelief with which we're unsure of how to fit into the other aspects. Because we have these doubts, we feel like a fraud. An impostor in the pews. You think that I'm a "good" Christian because of what you're convinced I believe and that you're a "bad" Christian because you don't believe what you're convinced that I think that you should believe.

First of all, my brothers and sisters in Christ, there are no second class citizens in the Kingdom of God. There are certainly no second class citizens in any congregation of which I am a pastor. I don't want you to think for one second that there's some kind of litmus test or qualification of belief test for you to be considered a "good" Christian or a "good" part of this community. You're here. That's enough. Secondly I

think that only a few of us are blessed with the faith gene. The faith gene is the thing that I call for the few folks who find belief to be easy. Most of us struggle with belief, if not all the time, some of the time. I don't consider myself to be a person who is gifted with the faith gene. I see myself as one who struggles and as one who struggles mightily and greatly and irreverently a substantial amount of the time.

However much I struggle, I am a Christian. I take the Bible seriously, but I don't always take it literally. I don't think that the Bible has to be a historically accurate document for it to contain truth. Just because it's old doesn't mean that it's irrelevant. Just because fundamentalists and civil religionists distort the Bible doesn't mean that the Bible is any less of an authority in my life, or as I really believe, in your life. I will argue with you about a host of theological points until I'm blue in the face. I am a Cantrell and Cantrells argue vociferously from time to time, but we don't condemn doubts or doubters. Doubts are necessarily part and parcel of a mature faith.

The first stories of resurrection demonstrate a diversity of belief and disbelief. In John's Gospel Mary Magdalene doesn't know what to make of the open tomb with its stone rolled away. She calls for help. When two disciples race to the tomb, the Beloved Disciple believes in the resurrection. This unnamed, unidentified beloved disciple has the faith gene. Exceptional folks have it, but most folks don't. Most of us, like Simon Peter, just wander away wondering what happened. We want to believe, but we just can't make the connection on our own. I identify with Mary, who is frozen to the spot with grief and indecision. Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener. I am a person for whom Jesus is right in front of my face the whole time, but it takes me a while catch on. For those of us slow learners, only when the experience becomes completely personal, only when Jesus goes so far as to call our name, do we realize-- of course it's Jesus who is speaking. God called me into ministry in 1990. It took me six years and \$10,000 more than David and I should have borrowed for me to accept my call into ministry. Like Mary, I am a slow learner.

The disciples believed only when Jesus made an appearance into a locked room and voluntarily showed them his hands and feet. Poor Thomas wasn't there. Thomas gets vilified for failing to believe, but he's an empiricist- a modern hero. Seeing is believing. He wants to test the theory. If Jesus is alive, then he can replicate the same thing that he showed to the rest of the disciples. Jesus did just that. He showed up and offered his scarred hands and side for Thomas to see and touch. Surely Thomas' example resonates deeply with many here.

So, yeah, belief sometimes alludes us. Sometimes it alludes us for years at a time. But sometimes, quite out of the blue, belief comes to us as one of life's weird gifts. I am preaching in that which is at least my third incarnation of belief in the resurrection. No longer do I have the straightforward faith of my youth. No longer do I need to rely on the power of metaphor to carry me through Easter. No longer do I have to guess if I'm faithful enough to proclaim the Easter message because some days I believe in the physical resurrection and some days I don't. Because right now, the resurrection is the only thing that makes sense to me.

Last December when my world turned inside out, I truly felt like I was going to shatter into pieces. The iceberg struck and I knew that the ship couldn't hold together. At that horrible time the idea/ the promise/ the reality of resurrection held me together. It literally preserved the integrity of my body. The darkness of Good Friday, a darkness which I thought I had heretofore seen but had not, the darkness enveloped me. All I knew was that something huge was dying. I was dead in the tomb shrouded in burial linens. Given that level of pitch which can only be found in a cave, I realized that whether or not my marriage could be saved or whether the best I could hope in this situation was for my own self to be saved, I knew that the only hope was resurrection. This body, so wounded with grief and pain, one way or another will know resurrection. The best gift I've ever been given was the knowledge, the flat out knowledge, that whether I see it coming or not, one day the light of dawn of that Sunday morning will arrive. One day I won't feel this awful pain buried deep in my chest. One day I'll get up to something different. I'll be scarred, but I'll be alive. As my friend Jill Kramer said, scars don't hurt. They only remind. Only the knowledge and the strength of Jesus' resurrection will make new life possible for me.

I'm slowly reading this incredible book called The Gospel According to Tolkien, by Ralph C. Wood. It's not just a great theological review of J.R.R. Tolkien; it's a great theological review. Ralph Wood discusses at length how Tolkien didn't write The Lord of the Rings as an allegory, meaning a one to one parallel with the Bible. Instead Tolkien deeply implanted theological ideas in his characters and in the setting of the book. The book itself is pagan. It takes place before the time of Christ. However, its expressions are deeply Christian. Tolkien wrote fantasy stories to serve a theological purpose. Wood says this:

True fantasies end happily, thus providing consolation for life's tragedy and . But

their endings are not escapist. Their felicitous outcome is always produced by dreadful disaster, by a drastic and unexpected turn of events, which issues in surprisingly deliverance. Tolkien calls this saving mishap a eucatastrophe: a happy calamity that does not deny the awful reality of dyscatastrophe- of human wreck and ruin. [...] Like C.S. Lewis, Tolkien regards many of the world's myths and fairy-stories as forerunners and preparations of the Gospel- as fallible human attempts to tell the Story that only the triune God can tell perfectly. [...] The Gospel is the fulfillment and completion of all other stories.
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The resurrection. Why do I believe that it's true? For the first time in my life I see that God's power to bring Jesus back from the dead is only the beginning. Instead of resurrection being the ultimate, final miracle, it's just a drop in the bucket of what God's power can do and what God's power actually does. God's power brings healing to egregious wounds of both body and soul. God's power allows addicts to recover. God's power liberates slaves and upends history. God's power overthrows empires. God's power wedges open people's souls that are sealed tighter than any large stone on a tomb. One day God's power will bring peace, lasting peace, to the Middle East. One day God's power will bring peace, lasting peace, to the inner city. One day God's power will mean that all children who were created equal will have truly equal opportunity. One day God's power will mean none will have too much and that none will have too little. One day God's power will soften the hardest heart. One day God's power will reign so that all folks realize that all other folks have a right to love and be loved as they were created to love and be loved. One day God's power will resurrect a soul that had less life and less merit and less goodness in his or her heart than was in Jesus' heart. God will gladly extend God's power to that soul because that's what God does. God resurrects dead things. Sure. Resurrection is unlikely and improbable, but I'm OK with that because, you see, I'm one of those dead things awaiting new life. When you've lost half your soul, resurrection is the only thing that makes sense. It's the promise upon which all hopes hinges. Only God's power can take a calamity and make it into something that is called good.

I don't wish you catastrophe, but most of the time if you live and breathe you're going to find yourself in one or you'll make one up for yourself. I don't wish you catastrophe, but if and when you find yourself in one whether of your own choosing or not, be as patient as you're able. Hang on as best you're able. Find whatever help you need to endure. It's Friday, but Sunday's coming. The tomb will be empty; the stone, rolled away. The resurrection will be yours. Of that I have no doubt. In the name of the Risen one who lives-- Amen.