

Sermon – “It Was Impossible”

Sunday, April 23, 2017

Scripture Readings: Acts 2:14a,22-32,36-39 and John 20:19-31

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Our first scripture reading comes from the book of Acts, chapter 2, verses 14a, 22-32, and continuing with verses 36-39. We hear an excerpt from a speech the apostle Peter gave to an assembled crowd 50 days following the resurrection. Listen for God’s word to you in Peter’s explanation of the meaning of the death of Christ and his resurrection.

^{14a}But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, ...

²²“You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know — ²³this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. ²⁴But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

²⁵For David says concerning him, ‘I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken; ²⁶therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover my flesh will live in hope. ²⁷For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption. ²⁸You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’

²⁹“Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that [God] would put one of his descendants on his throne.

³¹Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, ‘He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.’ ³²This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses...

³⁶Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

³⁷Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” ³⁸Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to [God].”

Amen.

Our Gospel reading tells us of a moment which actually took place weeks before the story in our first reading. This relates what the disciples were going through in the very first week following the crucifixion, when not all of them even knew yet of, or believed in, the resurrection. Listen for God's Word in this passage from the book of John, chapter 20, verses 19 through 31.

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord."

But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Sometime in the last couple of weeks, my three-year-old son Scott came across a picture of Jesus walking on water. The concept apparently fascinated him, because ever since then he has mentioned it numerous times. I was not there for this, but apparently a few days ago, when his grandmother was giving him a bath, he stood up. He walked back and forth in the tub, watching his feet sloshing through the water, declaring, “I can’t walk *on* the water,” and then announced, “Even daddy can’t walk *on* the water.”

Unfortunately, I have to admit that he was right.

I’m sure what caught his attention about this, and what has prompted repeated questions about how Jesus accomplished this after seeing it depicted, is that he knew it was impossible. He’s familiar enough with how water works to recognize the surprising nature of the event.

Our doubting friend Thomas was not so different. He was familiar with how death works. Is it any wonder that he should react as he did? Jesus was crucified. He was buried. And that was that. When, some time later, much to everyone’s surprise, Jesus showed up among some of the disciples, Thomas “was not with them...So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’”¹

It was impossible, thought Thomas, and of course he did. “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”²

It is an interesting feature of our other story, then, the story told in the first scripture reading, that it turns the idea of what is impossible completely upside-down. Let’s recall from the book of Acts what Peter said was impossible.

“[T]his man,” he said, “handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.”³ *It was impossible for him to be held in its power.*

We are talking about someone who has died. What would be our natural way of thinking? It is impossible that such a person—a dead one—could be alive again. Yet Peter declares it was impossible for Jesus to have remained dead.

This flips possibility and impossibility for everyone present. The surest of things becomes impossible, and the impossible the surest of things. The crowd to whom Peter gave his speech had to have their universe of possibility and impossibility reversed. As does any person, Thomas, you, or me, hearing the proclamation and description of this thing we celebrate with Easter.

¹ John 20:24-25a (*New Revised Standard Version*).

² John 20:25b (*NRSV*).

³ Acts 2:23-24 (*NRSV*).

Thomas and all the faithful who knew of the Lord's death, but not of his rising, lived in realms defined by impossibility. For one thing, it is impossible, one would have thought, that the *actual* Christ could possibly have been killed, and therefore the majority of the followers of Jesus most probably could simply not see him as the Christ anymore after his death. They had thought there was possibility in him, but the possibility for them was now gone.

Sad and desolate this loss of belief may have been for them, though, it would have been much worse for the still-believing few. For whoever understood who he was—the Son of God—and *maintained* their belief in his identity through the crucifixion, or those poor souls, like the centurion at the foot of the cross,⁴ who came to believe upon seeing him crucified, these lonely followers were facing even a much more horrifying situation of impossibility. Think again of what happened, described in that speech from Peter we heard.

“Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know — this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed...”⁵

This is the same Peter who, when Jesus had asked him, “Who do you say that I am?” answered “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”⁶ So when Peter makes this accusation—you killed him—and describes the facts surrounding the life and death of Jesus, he is building a case that they have *killed the Son of God*.

I don't think we always give full attention to the enormity of that charge. To be fair, this is partly because we already know the second half of the story, that he rose again and that this death and resurrection absorbs into it our death and offers us resurrection. But we undermine our capacity to respond to this as dramatically as we might, in faith and thanksgiving, if we gloss over it completely.

So consider this. Consider what the crucifixion story means on its face as the culmination of the history of God's relationship with the human race. The Hebrew scriptures tell a narrative of a creator God, creating things good, and of rebellion against that goodness. The entire, long Old Testament account is one of a God who displays patience, again and again, across the generations, extending a promise held in outstretched hands for ages upon ages; who offers new chances over and over, prophetic voices constantly bringing reminders of the path of goodness, only for the people to turn away, again, and again, time after time.

⁴ Mark 15:33-39 (NRSV): *When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “Listen, he is calling for Elijah.” And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.” Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was God's Son!”*

⁵ Acts 2:23 (NRSV).

⁶ See Matthew 16:13-20; quotes are specifically from Matthew 16:15-16 (NRSV).

Consider this story in the abstract. If we heard the tale of a God whose people kept insistently turning away and incurring guilt, a God who eventually sent the Son of God to earth, this would most naturally be interpreted as something like a last chance; the divine being visiting in person to verify, finally, what is to be done with these people...and if what happens is that we humans kill him, the obvious conclusion is that we're done for.

If there was any hope of humanity's redemption of itself, it is gone now. It has just been offered one last opportunity to receive God, but has instead put that opportunity to death, and condemned itself with finality. Surely anyone who believed in who Jesus was and saw what was done to him was therefore in utter terror after the crucifixion, for it was impossible that we could recover from this. We had just bought our own doom, for it was impossible to defeat God.

There is a parable which shows the preposterousness of the idea of even trying. In Matthew 21, Jesus tells of a vineyard leased out to tenant farmers, who repeatedly refuse to give what they owe to the servants the owner sends to collect, beating and killing them instead. "Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.'"⁷

I always think this is an odd parable, because who could possibly hear the tenants' scheme and think it is a solid plan? What landowner, upon hearing of the murder of his son, will simply decide to let the son's inheritance fall then to the murderers?

Yet this is pretty much what we, the people of the world, were trying to accomplish by killing off Jesus. The world order as it stands is, for some, profitable; for most, easier than changing; and for all of us, lets us persist in the pretense that we don't have anything much to repent of, give up, or change.

We humans are two-faced. We cry out for a messiah to overturn what we do not like...but let one show up in person, and it turns out we're willing to kill the Son of God just to end the threat of an actual messiah.

But of course this is foolishness. Nail a guy to a tree and then decide, "Well, that there God sure won't come 'round here and try any of *that* business again." Clearly this only gets us in deeper, when we're dealing with the Power behind the Entire Universe. It would seem, as I said, that we had one last chance and threw it away, burned our last bridge to salvation. It was impossible that we could defeat God.

But the mission of Christ turns out to be more deeply profound and thoroughgoing than we could possibly have imagined hearing a story like that in the abstract. It was impossible that we could have defeated God, indeed. But who is God? We have in the scriptures testimony of the astonishing nature of this one, true, everlasting God whose acceptance of death at our hands *was the very act of mercy the messiah came to bring.*

⁷ See Matthew 21:33-46. Quote is from Matthew 21:37-38 (NRSV). Versions of this parable are also found in Mark 12:1-12 and Luke 20:9-19.

Impossible to defeat God, yes. It was impossible that we could have defeated God whose goal was to bring salvation to the world! If we know it is impossible to defeat God's judgment, we should know it is also impossible to defeat God's love!

This is the testimony Peter makes in our reading for today. When Peter makes that bold, public accusation—you killed him—this is, oddly and astonishingly, not an announcement of irrevocable judgment having been passed on the human race. When the people present hear, and understand the magnitude of what has taken place, and are “cut to the heart,” and they desperately plead, “What should we do?” he has an answer, and it is a merciful one! Repent! Be baptized, so you may be forgiven; and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.⁸

This is the good news to which Peter bears witness. This is the gospel John tells us of when he writes that Jesus came back, after his murder, and his words were “Peace be with you;”⁹ and when, speaking of the miraculous signs of Jesus, John tells us they “are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”¹⁰

Life in his name.

We live in the season of Easter, my friends. And it may occupy only seven weeks of the liturgical calendar, but its deeper reality is as an everlasting season. It was impossible that death should hold Jesus Christ in its power, and it is impossible that death should hold us in its power if this same Jesus Christ is our deliverer. For this is our hope, and we say it boldly: dying he destroyed our death; rising he restored our life.¹¹

And so we remember his death; we proclaim his resurrection; we await his coming in glory. Alleluia. Amen.

⁸ From Acts 2:36-38 (NRSV).

⁹ He says this three times when appearing unexpectedly to the disciples after his resurrection as described in John 20:19-29.

¹⁰ John 20:31 (NRSV).

¹¹ This proclamation echoes the wording of one of the memorial acclamations regularly used by many denominations (including ours) in the liturgy for the Lord's Supper: “Dying you destroyed our death, rising you restored our life. Lord Jesus, come in glory.” Likewise the sentence which follows, which comes from an alternate acclamation used in the same place during the communion liturgy: “We remember his death, we proclaim his resurrection, we await his coming in glory.” Both of these are powerful as simple, stand-alone declarations of the salvation hope we find in the person of Jesus.