

Finding Roses Among Thorns

I'm sure you've heard the phrase: when life gives you lemons, make lemonade.

I personally have never cared for that saying. It has always sounded rather cheeky and shallow to me. It seems to trivialize or make light of what could be some difficult or even tragic situation. You wouldn't say that to some parent who just learned their child had develop leukemia. "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade."

I'm sure I've heard somewhere, but I couldn't find the origin of it, that roses, beautiful as they are, come with thorns. The implication is that even in the most beautiful and sublime of situations there is inevitable difficulty and pain.

A phrase I want to use is "finding roses among the thorns."

Ours is a prickly time and many people are tired of the negativity, anger, and fear that permeate our airwaves. What we need is a theology of resilience and hope. That's what I want this time today to be about - a theology of resilience and hope.

I know we are not supposed to gamble but I have a bet with my beautiful bride. My bet is that every time we are in the car and turn on the radio or every time we are at home and turn on

the small television set in our kitchen, I do this while I'm driving or cooking, that the odds are that the first thing we hear will be about Donald Trump. So far I have won millions of dollars - which she hasn't paid me. By the way, not a wide range of stations: NPR, PBS, CNN and the Symphony channel.

(I have this cartoon where a man and woman are in bed. He's asleep. She's reading. Trump is looking in their bedroom window and she is saying, "Will you just GO AWAY!"

He, and what he represents, won't. What he and his devotees signify is frighteningly dangerous.

I have just started reading "The False White Gospel" by Jim Wallis. Just released it is already on the NYT bestseller list.

As is true with anything I say in here, I don't want you just to take my word for what I say: check it out for yourself. Wallis is one of the most respected truly "conservative" real evangelical voices in this country.

As you know, one of my goals is to contribute to biblical and Jesus literacy. Right now I am exploring how the experience of resurrection happened and developed in the Jesus movement and how we in our lives and time can experience that resilience and hope. There are a lot of parallels between the political and social time of Jesus and those of our current culture right now.

As I said, I've just started reading this book. I want to read you two sentences from the introduction:

“Jesus is a victim of identity theft in America. Instead of wearing a bracelet that says, ‘What Would Jesus Do?’ or WWJD, it’s time to ask what did Jesus say, and what did he do. And to ask ourselves if we are willing to say and do that too.”

The reason I bring all this up is because of the movement in this state and in this country that goes under the banner of “Christian Nationalism.” It isn’t “christian” in any shape or form and people who seek to follow Jesus need to say that.

Andy Borowitz, a writer of wonderful political satire, had a piece recently where he wrote about the Trump trial that starts tomorrow. Borowitz quoted some fictitious person as saying that defendants who are innocent of a crime will usually do everything humanly possibly to delay their trials. People who have done nothing wrong want to push the day when their name is cleared as far into the future as they can and that they will spend massive amounts on legal fees to have a cloud of suspicion hang over them for as long as possible. It was a funny piece.

Most people know not to believe most anything that comes out of Trump’s mouth. He did say that if this trial starts tomorrow that there would be, and I quote him, “Hell to pay.” Thinking back to January 6, I believe him.

We live in thorny times. How can we find the roses? How can we experience and live out a theology of resilience and hope?

That's what this time today is about.

Let's get started.

Last week I sought to make relevant an understanding of resurrection that most of you have never been exposed to. Most all church-attending Christians, Protestant and Catholic alike, weekly affirm their belief - at least mouth the words - that Jesus was "crucified, dead, and buried and that, on the third day, he rose from the dead." I wonder what, if they are not numb to it and merely mouthing words, people really think, feel, mean by saying these words.

Some people hear about what the church calls "the resurrection" and say, "That is nonsense. Nothing like this did happen or could happen. A human body that has been dead and buried for three days doesn't come back to life."

This is called the "impossibility option."

If I said to you that we were running late this morning so I "just flew here," you would know that I didn't mean that I sprouted wings or hired a helicopter to get here. You would

know that I likely broke the speed limit and, perhaps, ran a stop light in order to make it on time. You would not take what I said literally.

People who take this “impossibility option” approach to resurrection miss not only its rich and deep meaning but also likely close themselves off from participating in the movement to a higher level of consciousness and awareness that goes by labels like “enlightenment,” “new life,” “being born again,” and other metaphors for the hope and resilience we all seek.

Others look at what is called “the resurrection” - again, I differentiate between “resurrection” and “the resurrection” - and say something like, “Well, I know it sounds improbable but it did happen once to our Jesus back there one time in history.” These people are not likely to say that the same thing holds true of someone in another religion. This is called “the uniqueness option.”

My contention is that both of these options are equally wrong.

The enlightened world, as we call it, has given us many wonderful things. Dualistic religion is not one of them. It has introduced into the world a religion, which I call “recent Christianity,” that claims God was in Jesus in a way that God has not ever been before or since. This “recent Christianity” is both exclusive and unique and it makes both God and Jesus into

things Jesus never taught nor claimed for himself. Further, it has split humans into beings who have both bodies and souls and, of the two, the soul is the most important. We just are temporarily stuck in these bodies.

I grew up in a religious tradition, and not a one of you, church-going or not, has not been exposed to some version of it, whose most important question was, “Are you saved?” That is, “Are you going to heaven when you die.”

This theology was expressed in a great Gregorian chant -

“This world is not my home,
I’m just a passing through.
My treasures are laid up
Somewhere beyond the blue.”

If you step back and look at it, this is a very selfish and narcissistic stance. The focus is on “me” and “my soul.” “To hell with the rest of you.” I really think that this is one of the reasons so many people who call themselves Christian are upset if they are told there is no hell. It is also one of the reasons we don’t take the earth seriously. It is stunning that so many people think their main purpose on earth or their meaning in life is to “go to heaven when they die.”

One of my professors once said, “Disbelief is a precious commodity. Don’t waste it.”

What he meant was don't spend it on debating the literal nature of what are called miracles. Rather, spend it questioning whether the conventional wisdom of our culture is wise and useful for the long-term future of everyone.

As I said last week, though I am critical of religions that literalize, I want to do more than just being critical. I want to put forward a religious and spiritual understanding that is broad enough to include any and everyone who wants to come to the table. What that is going to require is a willingness to do some serious engagement with the biblical tradition. Sadly, even very smart people who call themselves Christian are ignorant about how the text of their own Scripture came into being. Being exposed to this information is threatening to some people and exciting to others. My experience is that it opens the doors of possibilities to new truth and, therefore, to new life.

The best way to lose a vital religion is to try to sustain it literally. That only and always ends up in a bad place. Literalist Christians are always defending their God or faith system.

There was a burst of energy, enormous energy, that erupted out of the Jewish world after the death of Jesus that turned a bunch of fleeing, fearful men into loving, compassionate, fearless, joyful people who refused any longer to bow to the system.

Three decades after the death of Jesus a very well-trained, highly educated, disciplined Jewish leader named Saul of Tarsus wrote to some of his followers that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the father” (Philippians 2:10-11) This is a stunning and revolutionary statement for a Jewish man to make about any human life.

There were other things that happened - a different community life developed, the day of worship was changed from the Sabbath to the first day of the week, the tradition of a common meal came into being. These were in response to “something.”

Being in the Sacred Stream is also living with an awareness that we are not only in an evolutionary process but, I believe, we are also called to participate consciously in the process of evolution. I’ve heard, as have you, that this “energy field” that we are and are part of started with something called “the Big Bang” about 13.7 billion years ago. The scientists, the physicists, the cosmologists, the mathematicians can get us back to that time when they say that all that now is was perhaps the size of a pencil dot. They are able to get back to with fractions of a second when that moment occurred. But, they can’t go any further. There is an element of mystery that is in and before that moment. Indeed, they can’t even call it a moment because there was no such thing as time. Time is a human invention.

I don't want anyone to be upset by what you are hearing. I do want you to be disturbed. If you literalize resurrection, I'd like to disturb you out of that. If you have dismissed resurrection as nonsense, I'd like to disturb you out of that. I want to disturb you with joy and hope and possibility. Especially in these thorny times.

Religious traditions, no matter what religion, are a combination of subjective descriptions of actual events plus mythological interpretations of those events by people who see things at a higher cognitive level than most of us live. Joseph Campbell, the man who wrote *The Power of Myth*, among other incredible works, said that people have no difficulty seeing the mythology that makes up a religious system - if it is not their own. It comes in looking at our own tradition that we have difficulty.

I want to read to you something. It is a passage from the collection of Scripture known as "the New Testament." This is in what is known as First Corinthians, a letter written to a church in Corinth by Paul. Listen, or read:

"And don't tell me that I have no authority to write like this. I'm perfectly free to do this - isn't that obvious? Haven't I been given a job to do? Wasn't I commissioned to do this work in a face-to-face meeting with Jesus, our Master?" (9:1)

The translation you might hear in church is: “Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?”

These words are the most overt first-person statement about the founding moment of the Christian faith in all of the writings we have.

This is the first narrative of resurrection. You will note that it includes very few details.

One of the things I want to impress upon you about this passage is that when it was written, there were no gospels. It would be another fifteen years before Mark, the first gospel we have, was written.

Another thing I want to stress is that Paul claims that these things happened “according to the Scriptures.”

A third thing is that Jesus was raised by God. Jesus didn’t rise. That seems like a simple distinction but it is incredibly important. There is no sense at all in Paul of a physical resurrection of Jesus back into life in this world. God raised Jesus back into God’s own life.

I do not know how Paul could have been more specific. For Paul, there was no empty tomb, no disappearance from the grave of the physical body, no physical resurrection, no physical appearances of someone who would eat fish, offer his words for

inspection, or flit off into the sky after forty days. (This sentence was strongly influenced by Shelby Spong.)

People who literalize Easter say that without a physical resurrection there is no Easter. Well, Paul, the marketer of the movement, didn't think so. Indeed, he would deny it. But, for Paul, resurrection was a reality. By the way, just so you will remember, Paul never met Jesus before the crucifixion. But, no one would say that Paul's understanding of Jesus was insufficient to create such a new life, such a new being, such an incredible hope that he, Paul, was given a new name - Saul became Paul. It is this new life, hope and resilience that resurrection opens the door to for anyone who wants to talk not about the Sacred but commune with the Sacred.

It cannot be stressed strongly enough: The story of the life of Jesus is not a series of "prophesies fulfilled." Rather, the story of the life of Jesus is a creation using Jewish "midrash" that the Jesus community created to make sense out of their experience with Jesus. The Jesus story was an ongoing part of Jewish life and belief. Not a word of any gospel was written until decades after the death of Jesus.

Among the early followers of Jesus there were several things that led to the creation of the narratives about him.

First, as time passed fewer and fewer people had any first-hand experience of Jesus or of those who had. So teaching

stories were developed. These were created, as I talked about last week, by relating events in the life of Jesus to stories from the Jewish scripture. More than this: the stories about Jesus were shaped by stories from Jewish history. Every line and incident in the crucifixion stories, for example, can be found in Hebrew Scripture books like Jeremiah and the Psalms. The Gospel of Mark set the tone for this and the other Gospels followed that style.

This is important because when we get to other stories about Jesus you will need to keep in mind that they are not eye-witness reports but parables created by people who had been brought to new life by their following the way of Jesus. No higher tribute could be paid to Jesus than to bring him into this tradition.

One of the problems, all of this is just my opinion you know - you have to decide this stuff for yourself, is that religion, especially white male Protestant religion, has sought to put God in our box. It's the human tendency. Authentic, wise and useful religion seeks to put us in God's box. Judaism put Jesus in the Jewish story. But, sadly, we got separated from that and lost it.

A tiny example of this is that in Matthew Jesus is said to have sent disciples out to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Couldn't have happened. That theological formula wasn't created for centuries. It took over sixty years for the idea of an empty tomb to develop.

You've all heard of the story of "doubting Thomas." He wouldn't believe in Jesus' resurrection until he literally touched his wounded body. That story wasn't created for seventy years after the crucifixion and Thomas is a stand-in for all of those removed by decades from Christianity's founding event, just as he is a stand-in for you and me.

So, what was that founding event?

Let me begin moving in that direction by saying that objectivity is a carefully created human myth.

How many of you were alive when John Kennedy was assassinated? That was in November of 1963. Every moment of Kennedy's public life was either filmed or recorded. The parade where he was killed was televised. But, almost immediately afterwards details began to be debated about what really happened - even until now.

Objectivity is a carefully created human myth. That doesn't mean there is no objectivity reality. It does mean we won't possess it. Every step we take in life, every step we take away from an event gives us a new perspective on what happened. (This is why you will tell the story of the "vanishing coke bottle" differently two weeks from now than you will later today.) My point is that if we try to fix resurrection as an objective event, we will kill it. The evil of Christian

fundamentalism, at least one of them, is that it claims to know “what happened” and to have “the truth.”

Our goal, I hope you remember, is not to have some objective truth to believe. We all know religious people who claim they believe all the right stuff who are jerks. Jesus didn't say that he came so we might have the right stuff to believe. He said, “I came that you might have life - wholeness, that you might know your identity in God as I know my identity in God.”

Paul's experience of resurrection was timeless, spaceless, irrational, nonobjective, and unmeasurable. Within two generations of Peter, who is the first evidence of resurrection - a coward liar who was turned into a person of faith so solid that he became called “the rock” - within two generation of him and of Paul, the Christian community could not agree on even where the foundational moment of the community's life had taken place.

Let me read you something Shelby Spong wrote about what he calls “the Easter moment.”

“That which we Christians call the Easter moment was an experience that certain first-century people had in some form with the life of a first-century Jewish man named Jesus of Nazareth. A description of that actual experience was written nowhere. We have only stories, symbols, and folklore that interpret the experience and describe the effects of the Easter

moment. Jesus was crucified. He died. He was buried. Then the conviction grew that God had raised him in some way from the dead. Beyond these basis assertions, which were made with enormous power, every other detail is debated even in the Bible itself.”

My involvement with serious engagement with the biblical materials, especially the Jewish genius for creating literal stories out of their rich history that gave them meaning and motivation to live differently with one another and in the world, is so wonderful and hopeful for me. I hope I’m communicating some of that.

The Jews were and are among the most persecuted people on the planet. Their capacity of interpreting their tradition, which is called Midrash, is something they developed in the most difficult of circumstances. Among thorns, if you will.

Just take the story of Jesus.

Jesus lived more than 2,000 years ago. His life was relatively short - around thirty-three years. Most of us in this room are older than that and we consider, no matter how long we have lived, to have short lives! At most, only three years of his life were devoted to what is called his “public ministry.” Some scholars say that ministry lasted only one year.

Many people - not all, to be sure! - saw in him the power and presence and purpose of God. His very existence seemed marked by love and freedom. People who had been marginalized by society - those called unclean and shameful - found in him the joy of acceptance and forgiveness. Those who were warped and twisted in all sorts of ways found in him a source of peace. He was a person who experienced and expressed what theologian Rudolf Bultmann called “authentic existence” and he possessed what theologian Paul Tillich called “the courage to be.”

You and I could have no finer goal for our spiritual, religious and psychological growth than these two goals: authentic existence and the courage to be.

Jesus went about freely doing what no sane religious leader or spiritual teacher would do today - otherwise that person wouldn't have anyone to speak to or institutional support for speaking. Jesus seemed to have little patience with the religious and political establishments of his day. He unmasked religious pretensions and profiteering. When we are part of corporate evil, and I don't know anyone who isn't, we simply don't like that pointed out.

It doesn't take much imagination to speculate what that person of history would say to and about the people who claim to be marching under his banner today. Our own denomination's clumsiness in dealing with racism and homophobia has been SO

harmful to so many. How ironic that an institution that is supposed to reflect the love of God has been so harmful to so many.

A parallel I am trying to make between the time of the execution of Jesus and our time is that the times were scary and rough - likely more frightening and dangerous then than now. Even so, thorny times.

Over a period of time, instantaneous moments that took decades, Jesus followers experienced him as alive.

You know what I mean when I say “instantaneous moments that took decades”? A person struggles with an addiction, for example, for years and one day - after hitting bottom or getting the right insight or something, they are visited by “grace” and it is gone. We’ll talk more about how that happened in the coming weeks.

Peter said, “Jesus is alive.”

Paul said, “Jesus is alive.”

It wasn’t a belief. It was an experience.

They had gotten from Jesus that he didn’t talk about God - he talked with God.

Someone else who said “Jesus is alive” was Thich Nhat Hans, the Buddhist monk. He said, “Any time and any place we live as Jesus taught, Jesus’ spirit and energy continue in the world.” That’s resurrection.

What did Jesus teach?

If there is one thing that is clear about Jesus is that he crossed boundaries, broke down boundaries, and did not follow the rules of his society. One of the first things I heard Richard Rohr say decades ago was that his image of Jesus was of a person who laid around in a hammock for six days of the week and, then, on the Sabbath, got up getting busy irritating the religious establishment. He wanted to include everyone - especially those who had been left out before. One of the ways he practiced that was at a common meal. So that later he came to be not only remembered but known to people “through the breaking of bread.”

Another thing about Jesus’ way of living and teaching was that he exercised his prophetic tradition by calling out and into question the religious and political system of his day. A way in which his time and our time are very alike is that his religion had lost its way. I don’t know what it is about progressive or liberals but we are too polite for the good of those Jesus most cared about. Though all doctors take a vow to cause no harm, a surgeon must cut into a body to bring eventually healing. Jesus stood toe-to-toe with the political and religious leaders of his

day. The story of turning over the tables of the money changers in the temple was not a Sunday afternoon stroll. The movement called “Christian Nationalism” has not only lost its way but is judgmental, calloused and hard-hearted.

Another thing I would say about Jesus and the movement he started was that it was non-violent. Violence is a way of life in this country. Has been from the beginning. This country was taken by force from people who already lived here and solemn treaties made with them have been broken time and time again. Then, of course, there is the legacy of slavery and on-going racial discrimination. Recently a mother and father were talking with me about their pride and concern in and for their sixteen-year-son who just came out to them as gay. They love him and are glowing with his accomplishments but fear for his safety in the public school system.

Can you imagine what a transformation it would be if everyone who claimed they were Christian did these three things?

Here is the thing: you can't do these things by yourself. You can. But, not effectively.

On February 18th we attended a performance of the Mozart Requiem that was done here by the combined choirs of St. Paul's, accompanied by a full orchestra. It was stunning! The

church was SRO. Over seven hundred people attended. Hours and hours went into preparing for this event.

Mozart was alive in that performance. The performers channeled him, if you will.

It will take us hours of dedication, daily practice, sessioning (that's what magicians call it when we get together to practice moves), commitment, love, willingness, struggle, openness, honesty and likely other qualities we have yet to develop to bring Jesus to life in these thorny times.

But, there are roses we can produce by doing do.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: You carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.