

## *“We’ll See”*

The title I have given this time today is “We’ll See.” That is Tennessean for “We Will See.” It is a reflection from this present time with my present understanding of my faith about the importance of patience, persistence and endurance. All three of these skills - they are not personality traits - are essential for a sustained daily spiritual practice. What I also hope to do in this teaching today is to make the central doctrine of the Christian faith make not only enough sense that we all can embrace it in newer and deeper ways but also that it might contribute to our moving from one cognitive developmental level to another.

As I hope you are aware, we are exploring the theme Living in the Sacred Stream. By using this phrase I mean three things as areas for our ongoing religious and spiritual growth - a deeper and better understanding of Jesus and his teachings, a deeper and better understanding of our true identity, and a deeper and better understanding of the flow of cosmic evolution and how this is causing us to rethink everything.

I first learned the phrase, “We’ll see,” from my father when I was seven or eight years of age. If there was something I wanted to do, and nearly everything that fell into that category needed my father’s approval and/or assistance, I would ask him. “Can we go to the movie?” (Although we called it “going to the picture show.”)

“Can I go swimming in the river?” “We’ll see.”

“Can I sleep over at Jimmy’s house?” “We’ll see.”

I’m sure that time has likely distorted my memory but I cannot think of a single time when my father answered directly with a simple, “Yes” or “No.” It was always, “We’ll see.”

“When?” “We’ll see.”

“But, if it is okay with Mom?” “We’ll see.”

Patience, persistence, and endurance.

The doctrine or teaching that I want to explore is the one just celebrated in the Christian calendar: resurrection.

I want to give you a heads up that you are likely to hear things about this that you have never heard before and some of it may sound like attending a graduate seminar on doctrinal origins and development. But, if you stick with me and, as my mother would say, put your thinking caps on, I think you will find this part of the journey not only enlightening but, also, enlightening.

We’ll see.

Both the Nicene Creed, dating from the fourth century, and the Apostles’ Creed, dated some many years later, affirm that “Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried; and, that, on the third day he rose from the dead and, then, ascended into heaven

where he sits on the right hand of God, the Father Almighty.” (It’s the Nicene Creed that assures us that God is left-handed because Jesus is sitting on God’s right hand. The Apostles’ Creed corrects this impression.)

I believe in resurrection.

My faith in the hope and new life that resurrection opens the door to does not, however, demand that I believe in the non-mythological literalness of the creeds nor to believe that somehow a human body that had been deceased for three days experienced some supernatural intervention from some god apart from the earth. I do believe that in the experience called Easter there is a doorway through which we can gain access to an understanding, actually, it is much more than a mere understanding, that can lead us to an experience of the higher levels of conscious development we have been talking about the past several weeks.

I may, in some of my teaching, sound like I am interested in criticizing literal religious traditions. I am critical of them. I see them as not only limited but dangerous. But, what I really want to do is make a positive case for a religious understanding that is rich and engaging.

The next step we are going to take today is a serious engagement in the content of the biblical materials about resurrection. As I have cautioned before, if you have a “revealed

theology” - that is, one that believe that a god in the sky in some special way inspired or even dictated the words of the Bible - this will be challenging. Even if you don't have such a belief or understanding about the Bible, I promise that you are about to hear some new stuff. Be open to seeing some new possibilities. They may feel threatening. They may be exhilarating. Most of all I hope they open doors to new truth.

I am speaking from, and hopefully, to an understanding of a religious belief from a Jesus perspective. The reason I emphasize the “Jesus” aspect rather than “Christian” will, I believe, become clear as we go along. In doing do I want to be clear that this is a way to understand a doorway into Sacred Mystery through the life and teachings of Jesus. It is not the only doorway that exists. I will once again remind us - in doing spiritual work repetition is not redundant - that it is not the way because Jesus walked it; Jesus walked it because it is the way. If Jesus can be for us the doorway into the Sacred as he seems to have been for others in that critical moment when Easter dawned in human history, then this faith story can live in new ways in these challenging times and, God knows, we need a faith in hope and possibility now as much as any time I can remember in my lifetime.

Here is a mixed message:

I have said many times how grateful I am to have had the experience of growing up in a loving religious environment. Yes,

it was benignly fundamentalist, racist, and limited. People lived by the best light they had or were open to and at the level of development that their environment encouraged and supported.

I was taught the Bible by these people. I learned to read at an early age and my mother was a high school English teacher with a graduate degree in, of all things, Latin. My childhood did not include a television set and certainly nothing resembling a smartphone or the social media we have today. I read widely and a lot and likely if one of my children had those same habits, I would have wondered about them. I was reading Paul Tillich when I was in high school. Not bragging. Just saying.

In the university and in graduate school and on through a post doctoral program I lucked in to having some of the best teachers possible. (Easter Sunday night I happened to turn on the television and in going through the channels saw that they were rerunning The Ten Commandments with Charlton Heston. Just awful by today's standards. My Hebrew and Old Testament professor was a consultant to Cecil B. De Mille on that movie. Just saying and one of the translators of The Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

I got to do a post-doctoral program at Harvard with the best biblical and theological scholars at the time.

But all of that was at least fifty or more years ago and as foundationally important as it was, and is!, looking back I can

now see how ignorant my teachers were. Not stupid. They were among the smartest people I have ever known. But ignorant in the same way, or an analogous way, to the ignorance my high school science teachers were about the nature of the cosmos.

I was raised in the proud, excessively so I might add, Protestant conviction that anyone was capable of interpreting the Bible. I now understand that is somewhat like saying, “Anyone is capable of doing heart surgery.”

I do not believe that anyone can understand the Bible, especially the earliest parts of the Christian collection without understanding that it is a decidedly Jewish document written using a Jewish way of interpreting events in the light of a Jewish way of creating scripture.

Religious illiteracy and stupidity abound in this country. The idolatry and idiocy surrounding the Bible, especially as evidenced by the “Trump Bible” would be hilarious if it weren’t so terrifying. (By the way, a real billionaire Christian would give Bibles away, not sell them for \$60.)

Think about this - and I’m just drawing from the Easter narratives for this: if you smash all the telling of the Easter event together you will read that when Jesus was arrested, all of his disciples fled, forsook him. Yet, we are given intimate details about what Jesus said, what people in the crowd said, what the two thieves being crucified with him said, what the centurion

said. We are told what the soldier did, what Pilate did, what Herod did - in private with just Pilate and Jesus. Where did this information come from? Who recorded it? Who transcribed it? How is there a way to attest to the “historical authenticity” of any of it?

There isn't.

The crucifixion stories - there are several and they contradict each other - are the products of a Jewish way of interpreting events. The way is called “midrash.” There are different kinds of midrash. The one we are interested in is called “Haggadah” and it is “the interpretation of a story or an event by relating it to another story or event in sacred history.” Perhaps the most obvious and accessible example is the Seder - a ritualistic meal with a story to reenact and celebrate the Jewish story of Passover. “Midrash is the Jewish way of saying that everything to be venerated in the present must somehow be connected with a sacred moment in the past.” (Shelby Spong.)

Because biblical knowledge and understanding, as well as knowledge about how to read and interpret the Bible, has largely been lost - and, I'll try to explain how and why that happened in a moment - people have been left with having to see the Easter story as something that is literally true or an an untrue fantasy. What we lost, what even my best teachers lost, were Jewish minds and eyes with which to understand our own Scriptures.

Keep in mind: Jesus was a Jewish mystic who lived and taught in the prophetic tradition of his religion - which was Jewish. Marcus Borg used to love to tell the story of a woman who approached him after one of his lectures and said, “Professor Borg, are you absolutely certain about what you said in your lecture tonight?” He asked her what she was referring to. She said, “Are you certain that Jesus was Jewish.” He assured her that Jesus was Jewish. She replied in a huff, “Well, surely his mother wasn’t.”

Paul, the first writer about resurrection was Jewish. By the way Paul mentions nothing about an empty tomb or any resurrection stories. For Paul, after Jesus was buried, he was taken directly up into the presence of God. There are Hebrew stories that paved the way for this, as we’ll see at a later time. Mark and Matthew and John were Jewish. The possible exception is Luke who was likely what is called a Greek Jew.

Several divisive events occurred that removed Christian writings from Jewish interpretation.

First, was the division that produced the Gospel of John - written almost a hundred years after the birth of Jesus.

Initially the Jewish followers of Jesus returned to their synagogue roots after his execution. They there searched their Scriptures for some clue about what they had experienced. Almost every word of the crucifixion stories can be found drawn



from Jewish writings. The stories of the crucifixion were created just as Jesus had created his parables. We'll get to some of these creations later.

The Jews who did not see, experience or accept Jesus as a way to understand God, pushed the Jewish Jesus followers out of the synagogues. That's the first split.

The second distancing from Judaism came as a result of Paul's success in spreading the Jesus story into a non-Jewish world. New converts to the movement didn't have Jewish roots. That the second split.

Centuries passed. Most people couldn't read. Scriptures were not easily accessible.

Then you have the Copernican revolution and a literal interpretation of much of scripture is no longer tenable. So, the Bible came to be studied in a new way - but not a Jewish way. There is the third split.

At this time those interpreting the Bible thought that their scholarship might raise more questions than the church could adequately answer so the fruits of biblical scholarship were kept separate from parish life and that began the ever-widening gap between academic biblical students and average pew-sitters which has continued until this day.

Another huge split occurred at the time of the misnamed Protestant Reformation. Soon the pope was declared infallible in the Catholic Church and the Bible was declared infallible in most of Protestantism. Protestants have become masters of splitting of trivializing.

All of this is a very overly simplistic explanation of why we are in the mess we are in today. I feel I am free to be critical of the church because I love it. But the current Methodist debate, on-going, about the language of full inclusion is acting out a death wish. It is the epitome of “fiddling while Rome burns.” I can imagine the Jesus of history looking at our current social, economic, and political situation and hearing the church debate about everybody being included and saying, “This is what you think is important?”

When you read one of Jesus’ parables, you don’t ask, “Did it happen?” When we read the stories about Easter as haggadic midrash, we don’t ask, “Did it happen?” Rather we ask, “What was there about Jesus that caused him to be incorporated into the Jewish tradition like he was?” It is only when you cut the story away from its Jewish roots that people began to make really rather insane claims about the story; such as, “did it happen?”

There were a couple of phrases that Christian Fundamentalists came up with in the Sixties to claim their superiority. One was “The Religious Right.” The other was “The Moral Majority.” The “religious right” is neither religious nor

right and the “moral majority” is growing in number as well as in immoral behavior.

I’m inviting you to be open to an understanding of a religious faith about Jesus that doesn’t depend on an empty tomb, a resuscitated body, angels that descend to roll away stones, a body that can walk through locked doors and then is wafted up into the sky on ascension Sunday.

All of this may sound very unfamiliar to many of you. For this the church owes you an apology. As I said earlier, it may mean for some of you giving up some things, maybe even cherished notions, that mean much to you. On the other hand, it may be for others of you new light, hope and possibility. We’ll see.

This way of faith, just like understanding and living one of Jesus’ parables, means living with a faith where God is seen as past, present, and future all at the same time.

I have a hat. Actually, I have a collection of hats. I recently added to my collection a hat about which my beautiful bride said, “Please don’t wear that.” Now, I’ve gotten the wifely eye-roll about a lot of my hat choices but never, “Don’t wear that.” The hat in question is one that says, “Make Satire Great Again.” She said, “It’s too risky of being misunderstood and misinterpreted. Not worth it.” At this year’s National Religious Broadcasters Association International Christian Media

Convention where Donald Trump was the keynote speaker, there were hats for sale that said, “Make American Pray Again.”

We here, and I mean here at St. Paul’s and somewhat in the part of Houston where we reside, live inside of a bubble. It is a good bubble and I’m grateful for it. But, it’s a bubble and is in no way reflective of what, according to the polls close to half the voting population in this country believes. I can freely say that Christian Nationalism is a grave threat to this country but, as you well know I could not teach the class I have so far taught today in most Christian churches. Most pastors are up against the wall when they try to address Christian Nationalism. People like Diana Butler Bass, who has been here, Adam Russell Taylor, of Sojourners, Richard Rohr and others has less concern because they are not in churches.

White Christian Nationalism is laying the foundation for and giving power to a growing authoritarianism within this country. This authoritarianism is appealing to an increasing number of Americans.

I have had to rely on others for what you are about to hear because I don’t listen to Fox News nor am I on Social Media. What I’m sharing is coming from those people I just named - Bass, Wallis, and Rohr.

Donald Trump has posted several stories claiming miraculous backing for his candidacy, that he is the “Chosen

One” and likening his legal trouble to those of Jesus crucifixion. There is an image that Trump posts frequently on social media of Jesus sitting with him at one of his courtroom appearances.

Vanity Fair, a publication not noted for its theological sophistication, opened the issue after Easter with this:

“Donald Trump, who kicked off the holy week by hawking Bible for sixty bucks a pop, spent Easter Sunday mired in sacrilege - attaching his prosecutors and political foes and casting himself as a martyr. He promoted a Washington Times op-ed piece that condemned ‘the crucifixion of Donald Trump.’”

I am not making it up when I say that there are people who are embracing a theology of “Trump the Savior,” a new political Jesus. They believe it. They believe Trump is being sacrificed for them.

Here is an interview with two evangelicals. I just happened to see this. A man and woman, husband and wife, interracial marriage, and those of you with an evangelical background will hear echos of that in what they had to say. They don’t get the theology wrong. They just apply it to trump. Here is what was broadcast on CNN.

“Man: The Bible says he was wounded for our transgressions. He did it for us. When Trump is facing all these things he is doing it for us in our place.

“Woman: Jesus died for my sins. Jesus died for me and so I - it connects in my brain that way. Like, he is doing this for us as a country to make the changes we need to make and he is the target where we don’t have to be.”

Trump himself claimed in one of his rallies, “I am being indicted for you.”

Folks, this is heresy. Worse, it is idolatry.

One of the people I see for spiritual direction said to me this week, “Do you really know what is going on out there?” I had to admit that I probably didn’t. He said, “Let me show you something.” And, he played a video for me on his phone. I want you to see it too.

(Show video.)

Whether Donald Trump wins the election in November is not inconsequential. It is very much so. But, either way, win or lose, this dynamic of Christian nationalism is not going away. I think my saying much to you about this is like preaching to the choir, as the saying goes. Besides, I’d much rather teach the kind of biblical literacy material that made up the first part of our time today. I’m not done with it and there is much more to say about how the Easter Event got morphed into the misunderstood story that it has become. But, not to speak as a follower of Jesus

about what is going on in our country and the peril we are in is to be, in my opinion, unfaithful to the Gospel.

I began the journey that led me to this spot right here today by and because of my involvement in the Civil Rights movement. It may, or it may not, surprise you to recall that movement started out of evangelical Christianity. So did the movement to oppose the war in Vietnam. Martin Luther King, Jr. was an intense evangelical Christian. And before him, the man who was his model, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian executed for his plot to overthrow Hitler, also a committed evangelical Christian.

And now. . . . ?

What happened?

It is the evangelical - that word means “good news bearer” - in me that wants to appeal to you, even though you may think you already are, to follow Jesus, to allow Jesus to come into your heart. Not to save you. You don’t need saving. But, our world does. Our country does.

Part of my own daily spiritual practice is to pray that I may be graced every day with more and more of resurrection so that the power of resurrection may work on all that I am and all that I do. To me this is one of the things I mean when I say that I am Christian.

Jesus with me, Jesus within me.  
Jesus behind me, Jesus before me.  
Jesus beside me, Jesus to win me.  
Jesus to comfort and restore me.  
Jesus beneath me, Jesus above me.  
Jesus in quite, Jesus in danger.  
Jesus in the heart of all who love me.  
Jesus in the mouth of friend and stranger.  
(That's my adaptation of the St. Patrick Prayer.)

We need more Jesus people in the world. Not people who would hide that under a bushel as he would say. But, people who would let their light shine.

Here is another thing: moving from one level of awareness or consciousness, is not easy. It is like a death.

Let's say that we have decided to get on the path and follow Jesus. I want to give you a metaphor for what the journey might look like.

I think this is true for any wise and useful spiritual path one might choose but mine is that of Jesus. I'm assuming it is yours as well, else you wouldn't be here.



We have been attracted to him enough to want to know about him and what he taught. What did he really say, in contrast to what some of his admirers or detractors have said about him?

So we have walked together for some time. Perhaps a short time. Perhaps decades. But, we're still here. We decide to stop and sit for a while. After a long period of silence, Jesus says to us, "You know, I really like you. You're neat to hang out with and I'm please about so much about what you have learned and how you live. Thank you."

We beam.

He gives us a hug.

He says, "You know, so far on our walk together, you have pretty much in charge of things. (Long pause.) I'd like to take over now. (Our anxiety level goes up. We like being in control.) See that cave over there. That's actually my tomb. God is in there. I want you to go have an encounter with the Source of my wholeness and of your wholeness too."

Now, I want to interrupt this narrative right here to say that so far on the journey, the pats on the head from Jesus, the hugs and "atta-boys" have felt good. They have been essential. We have had a sneaky suspicion that Sacred Mystery was hidden from our sight but have thought that by our spiritual practices God would herself come out of the cave and give us a hug, tell

us how precious and cute we are and so forth. That God would say, “You go and have a nice life. Call me if anything comes up where I can help you out. If I’m not too busy helping a sports team, I’ll see what I can do to help you out.” And, you know what? There is a certain truth to that. It is an untrue truth because it is the ego’s truth.

The ego gets just enough juice from spiritual practices to keep going. But there is a sharp U-Turn in the Spiritual Journey. It is not a one-time event but, rather, one we get to take every day and sometimes every step. That is one reason I love to read from time to time as part of my daily practice “Always We Begin Again.”

At any rate, if we stick with Jesus we being to realize that though we may have begun this journey in order to get something, what really matters is that we become someone. They we are here not to get but to give.

O Divine Master

grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood, as to understand,  
to be loved, as to love,  
for it is in giving that we receive  
it is in self-forgetting that one finds,  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Nevertheless, we sit there with Jesus looking at the tomb, the grave, and we confess, “I don’t want to go. I didn’t sign up for this. This is not what I want.”

How long do we sit there? Three days? Three months. Three years? In the Hebrew parable Jonah was in the belly of the big fish three days. Jesus was in the tomb three days. Three’s pop up all over the place in stories about transition and transformation: three blind mice; three little pigs; a minister, priest and a rabbi walk into a bar; Goldilocks and the three bears; father, son, Holy Spirit, etc. Three is the number signifying transformation. We say we want it but we try to see if there is not some other way. “Please, not this. If it is possible, I want another way.”

Then we recall that night when the one who has led us this far tried to cut his own deal. “Please deliver me from this. This is not what I want.” But, he had the courage and faith to add, “Not my will, but thine be done.”

He nudges us with his elbow and, reluctantly, we get up and head toward the mouth of the tomb.

As we are just about to reach the mouth of the cave, we hear him call out. Perhaps he is going to say, “Just kidding, you don’t have to go.” Or, “Everything’s going to be okay.” Which it is. But, that is not what he says. What he says is, “By the way,

you can't take anything with you. Drop your stuff, your roles, your clothes, your smart phone, your to-do list, your tribal loyalties, your notions of race and economics, your educational status, your nationalism, all that stuff.”

This is our introduction before we die to the fact that we can't take anything with us and, though we may not know it now, we will look back on this moment as one of the most blessed moments of our lives.

And, here is one other thing about this. Tomorrow we have to get up and do it again. Always we begin again.

Will we individually and corporately make the journey

We'll see.

If we do, we'll see.

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