

Sermon – John 11
Everyday Resurrections
April 6, 2014

He's got the whole world in His hands...

Most of us have learned this song from the time we could sing. We would sweep our hands out to signify the wide world enfolded in God's hands. We would cup our hands together, imagining the giant strong hands of God. We would sing to each other affirming to one another that *that no matter what, God has got us firmly in God's grip.*

But life sometimes tells us another story. Along the way, we learn, too, that we are all vulnerable: we get hurt; we get sick; we will all die someday. There is suffering in the world: suffering brought about by cancer and car accidents; suffering brought about by war and human trafficking; suffering brought about by abuse of the powerless; by the hoarding of wealth by the wealthy; by legislation in this country and abroad that limits the basic human rights of some while maintaining vast freedoms for others.

And we know that the story of this nation – founded on principles of freedom and democracy – began with a narrow definition of who had access to the freedom and democracy heralded by the Founding Fathers. Not the men, women and children who were native residents of this countryside. Not women of any race. Not the men and women stolen from their

native land and sold as property to white male landowners, enslaved for their labor and denied every basic freedom.

He's got you and me brother, in His hands; he's got you and me sister in his hands, he's got you and me brother in his hands. He's got the whole world in his hands.

Jesus receives word that a dear friend has grown sick. When Jesus and his disciples arrive in Bethany days later, they learn that sudden sickness has ended in death. Jesus' beloved friend Lazarus has been laying in a tomb for 4 days, wrapped in cloths from head to toe. A family – a community – is changed. Sisters are left alone. A community gathers to mourn. Life has stopped – not just for Lazarus, but for all of them. **Even Jesus is moved to tears.**

And as it would be for most of us, the scene of loss is also a scene of confusion. Jesus is greeted by Mary and Martha, they speak the words of confusion and lament we have caught ourselves saying in the silence of our hearts: “If only you were here, our brother would not have died.” “Where were you Jesus? We thought that surely we could count on you. We thought you loved us and that you would work your miracles for our family too.”

Mary and Martha raise the question we have asked over and over again: *where is God in the midst of our suffering? If God is for us, then why: why is there violence – the violence of war, of bullying, of police brutality and human trafficking? Why are there mudslides? Why are there missing planes, and*

earthquakes and so much out of anyone's control? Why is there abuse – even within families? Why is there illness that can only be fought valiantly, and maybe never overcome? Why do we sing *He's Got the whole world in his Hands* if we all still know struggle, if we all know suffering?

Spirituals invite us into this question. For we ourselves see in the tradition of the spirituals that songs of faith emerged from a community of believers so deeply oppressed. In the singing of spirituals, songs of faith passed through the lips of those who have known suffering unlike what most of us will ever know, even on our darkest days.

The spirituals make a theological claim that the chains of this world will not hinder the glory that is to come. The spirituals state a truth: that even though there are others who assume and abuse power, God's redemptive power in and through Jesus Christ will have the ultimate say. The spirituals remind us that although there are those who seek to tell lies about who we are, our faith reminds makes the bold political and spiritual claim about the **full humanity of all of God's people. We are** children of a loving God, redeemed by grace and sustained by faith. God has us in the palm of God's hands.

James Cone writes: "Without the knowledge of God that comes through divine fellowship, the oppressed would not know that what the world says about them is a lie. They would have to believe what they are *made* to believe through police

sticks and guns. But if one has a relationship with the Resurrected One, then one can know that one has an identity that cannot be taken away with guns and bullets."¹

He's got you and me neighbor in his hands; he's got you and me, children in his hands; he's got you and me neighbor in his hands, he's got the whole world in his hands.

Jesus steps up to the tomb commanding – against the objections of Martha – that they roll away the stone. He calls into the tomb, commanding Lazarus to come out of the tomb. He calls the onlookers to participate in Lazarus' resurrection by telling them to unbind Lazarus so that he may live.

And Jesus does this with us. Our lives are full of these **mini-resurrections** where hopelessness is chased away with hope, where despair is chased away by joy, where a lost cause is turned on its heels and gives way to opportunity. After months of treatment for cancer, we go into remission. After weeks of physical therapy following our surgery we can walk again. After weeks of marital counseling, we reach a new depth of understanding and love with our spouse. After years of parental worry, our child reaches one year of sobriety. After being laid off for months, we get called back to work. After years of estrangement from a loved one, we reconcile. The list goes on.

What's more, **we are called to participate in these everyday resurrections:** by helping to free those who are

¹ Cone, James. *God of the Oppressed*. P 132.

oppressed; by feeding those who are hungry; by ministering to those who are sick; by standing up for the rights of those who are marginalized; and sometimes, simply, by stepping forth in hope, leaving the tombs that have bound us, so that we too, might be free.

Frederick Douglas writes of his escape from the bondage of slavery to the freedom of the North. He rides a train from Maryland to New York, disguised as a mariner, with papers allowing him to ride to freedom. Once in New York he knew that he had to continue the journey further North to Nantucket to be truly safe from the hands of those seeking to capture and send him back to the South. He writes:

The fifth day after my arrival, I put on the clothes of a common laborer, and went upon the wharves in search of work. On my way down Union Street I saw a large pile of coal in front of the house of Rev. Ephraim Peabody, the Unitarian minister. I went to the kitchen door and asked the privilege of bringing in and putting away this coal. "What will you charge?" said the lady. "I will leave that to you, madam." "You may put it away," she said. I was not long in accomplishing the job, when the dear lady put into my hand two silver half-dollars. To understand the emotion which swelled my heart as I clasped this money, realizing that I had no master who

could take it from me—that it was mine—that my hands were my own, and could earn more of the precious coin—one must have been in some sense himself a slave.²

Even within stories of suffering. Even within systems that oppress and abuse. Even within questions and laments, we have a reason to hope. For God in Christ has entered our despair. Weeping with us, this same Christ breathes new life into the devastation around us, calling us to life, abundantly.

God calls us out of the tombs which hold us, out from under the things which hinder and bind us – inviting us to step out into the light of day and *live*. God calls us away from those things which destroy us or kill us: addictions and greed, cruelty and lies; racism and sexism and heterosexism; war and poverty; fear and hate. God calls us to a new way – to that which heals, that which forgives, that which nurtures, that which loves.

We, too, experience everyday resurrections that free us from the tombs of our woundedness, that call us to live. They may not look as remarkable as Lazarus' exit from the tomb. ***But grace breaks in.*** When we are able to find the energy to get out of bed after the loss of a loved one. When one who is struggling has a good day. When someone embraces us even though we feel unworthy of love.

² Frederick Douglas

Our lives are filled with everyday resurrections that remind us that, even where our brokenness threatens to define us, God's love for us will have the final say.

Everyday resurrections are for us, too – and they point us to the transforming power of Christ's resurrection as it breaks into this world, and as it holds a claim on us for the life to come. The story before us today serves a sign to us of **Christ's ultimate victory over death, reminding us that the tomb could not hold Jesus.** God in Christ is raised to *new life* – and not merely resuscitated-more-of-the-same life, but *resurrected* life.

See Lazarus will die another day. The miracle about which we read would not last forever. He would grow sick and die another day. But the *resurrected Jesus* is a new creation. **Christ's risen body one that would never die again.** And so we have cause to hope. For even when the afflictions of this world hold us back or wound us, in Christ we are extended a certain victory: the promise of eternal life in him – *the one over whom the grave had no hold.*

We have reason to hope. We have reason to take heart. We have reason, even to sing. For God, in Christ, does have the whole world in His hands. Thanks be to God.