

April 3, 2016

TEXT: Acts 5:27–42

TITLE: Easter Mindfulness

At a Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra concert on January 29, pianist Denis Kozhukhin was the soloist playing the Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto #3—one of the hardest piano concertos ever written. After an amazing performance, Denis came back out to do an encore. He sat down at the piano and played a quiet Bach prelude, one whose melody is composed of a simply undulating 16th-note pattern. It is a beautiful, calming piece—almost a type of musical meditation. Listen. (play piece) After the sermon, I'll play this piece again and that time I'll play it through twice, because hidden within the notes is another melody that was there all along, longing for us to hear it, if only we have ears to hear.

The title of this sermon is “Easter mindfulness.” Mindfulness is one of those words that is very popular at the moment. Sometimes you may tell yourself to “pay attention” or “stay alert.” But the goal of mindfulness is something more than just being on your guard. It refers of a type of awareness—a sensitivity to the “big picture” in which you intentionally try to take everything in. Socrates long ago said that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Modern philosophers would say that “a life without focus, without mindfulness, is a wasted, distracted life.”

How does one achieve mindfulness? Well, you start by slowing down; by stopping to smell the roses. It involves taking deep breaths and really noticing what is going on around you and within you. It involves being aware that you are alive and remembering what an amazing, precious gift that is.

Now, since we live in America, lots of people have figured out not only how to stress the importance of mindfulness, but also how to market mindfulness. One reporter described how you can get a mindfulness app for your iPhone that will lead you through a daily guided mindfulness exercise (\$13 a month for premium content) while you sip a cup of Mindful Lotus tea (\$6 for 20 bags). Or you can make a sandwich with a non-dairy mayonnaise substitute called Mindful Mayo (\$4.50 a jar) as you flip through the latest issue of Mindful magazine (\$6 a copy).¹ There is a book called “*One-Minute Mindfulness: 50 Simple Ways to Find Peace, Clarity, and New Possibilities in a Stressed-Out World*,” which dubiously suggests I can achieve true inner peace in less time than it usually takes me to put on my socks each morning. And of course there are meditation studios popping up in big cities with names like MNDFL and Unplugged, where you can attend a mindfulness session for just \$15 for 30 minutes or \$25 for 45 minutes—which if you meditate on those prices for a moment, you realize that the longer session is actually a worse bargain than the short one.²

Now, don't get me wrong: There is a real value to meditating, to quieting down your monkey brains and focusing your spirit through times of silence, prayer and contemplation. There is so much we miss in life because we're too busy to notice

what's right before our eyes. That is especially true in terms of things of the spirit. We are seldom fully mindful of the ways God is near to us, active around us, anxious to guide, comfort and encourage us, mostly because we forget to include God as part of the rich array of things we see and experience every day.

Hold onto that thought—or should I say “be mindful of that thought” —as I shift for a moment and talk about Easter. Easter is the church celebration in which we remember how God in Christ was made known to us through Jesus' resurrection from the dead. The crucified Savior was victorious over death itself. His followers not only found an empty tomb on Easter morning, but they encountered a living Christ in the days after Easter—and have gone on to profess that the risen Lord is alive and active in our world through the power of the Holy Spirit and the loving, in-dwelling grace of God. That is the basic message of Easter for Christians: Jesus Christ is resurrected, risen from the dead for once and for all.

Now even as I say that, you and I know that some people do not believe Jesus was raised from the dead on Easter morning. They question the biblical evidence; they say that they want more proof before they'll believe in the resurrection. The skeptical philosopher Bertrand Russell was once asked what he would say to God if it turned out there was one and he came face-to-face with God on the judgment day. Russell replied, “I would say ‘You gave us insufficient evidence.’”³ That response makes me chuckle because human beings are provided with sufficient evidence all the time for lots of things and still we choose to doubt and disbelieve. There is plenty of evidence showing that human beings are a factor in global warming—or warning about the dangers of lead paint and lead pipes—or the tragedy in pushing jail time over treatment programs for drug offenders, or wondering why it is so difficult to lower the U.S. prison population even as we continue to build “for-profit” privatized prisons that require a set number of inmates to be profitable. The issue is seldom insufficient evidence. The issue is an unwillingness to act on the evidence clearly before us. The issue is a disregard of what is right in front of us. The issue is a lack of mindfulness about the truth of God's presence and resurrection power active in our world, calling us to pay attention and see things in a new way, a faithful Easter way.

A while ago I read about some people who were waiting to pick up a family member at the JFK Airport international arrivals terminal. Behind closed doors were the luggage carousels and the long lines of people waiting to clear customs. Every so often the doors would open and a few people would drift out, pushing overloaded luggage carts and scanning the crowd for family members. Suddenly there was a collective gasp as the doors opened and a dark-haired young woman walked out alone, wearing a floor-length white wedding dress and veil. The crowd burst into spontaneous applause as she made her way down the walkway. She got to the end and started back when a young man, holding a small bouquet of flowers, came out of the crowd. As he shyly touched her arm, she turned to him and they embraced. The crowd burst into applause again, but as the couple walked out, everyone's mind was filled with questions: Was this her

fiancé? Were they going directly to the wedding ceremony? Had they ever met before? And where for heaven's sake was all her luggage?⁴

Originally everyone waiting in that airport terminal had only seen a set of closed doors—an ugly, functional barrier that blocked their view of what was happening inside. But because of one woman in a wedding dress, those doors now held the potential for beauty and wonder. Now the crowd never knew what they might see when those doors slid open. Everything was different and alive with possibility from that mindful moment on.

When the apostle Peter was preaching to a skeptical world about Jesus Christ, he was arrested and beaten for telling people there was sufficient evidence to believe that the rabbi who'd been crucified had been raised from the dead. People argued back that they'd seen the man die, seen his body taken down from the cross, seen the tomb where he'd been laid sealed up with a heavy stone. But Peter argued they hadn't seen everything—they hadn't seen this gentle man heal the lame and cure the blind, hadn't seen the light of God's love shine forth as he preached "*Blessed are the meek and pure in heart, for they shall see the kingdom of God.*" And they hadn't seen the empty tomb and shared a meal with this Jesus, now Christ, the risen Lord. But all that had happened and from that moment onward, everything was different.

There was no way to resolve this argument. But a wise teacher named Gamaliel interrupted Peter's interrogation and told the accusers one simple word of advice: *If this Easter story is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to stop it being shared—and if you try, you may be fighting against God!* Gamaliel basically told them to stop being distracted by their own biases and prejudices and worldly logic, and instead to consider where God might be in this equation. He told them to be mindful, to be open to the possibility that a door had opened before their eyes and the incarnate God, a risen Christ, had truly stepped out before them and everything was now changed.

Easter mindfulness calls us to look at all of life in this way—to ask "Where is God in this situation? Is this moment an opportunity for justice, for healing, for a word of hope, for a prophetic call to action? Is what is before me only a door or is it an opening into a deeper faith and a healthier, compassionate future for all? Is this act of human origin or is God right here?" You might be surprised how often the latter answer is the correct one—especially since the risen Christ promised "I'll be with you always, even to the end of the age."

I'll play the piano piece again. I will not be adding a single note, but as it is repeated, notice how something that was there all along, with a little mindfulness and emphasis, is suddenly clearly heard and appreciated. Easter is just like that.

¹ David Gelles, "The Hidden Price of Mindfulness, Inc.," *New York Times*, March 27, 2016.

² Caren Osten Gerszberg, "Growing Numbers of Harried New Yorkers Are gathering to Close Their Eyes and Just Breathe," *New York Times*, March 27, 2016.

³ William Irwin, "God is a Question, Not an Answer," *New York Times*, The Stone column; March 26, 2016.

⁴ *New York Times*, Metropolitan Diary, October 18, 1998.