

Romans 6:3-11 John 20:1-18 Easter Bill Uetracht 3.31.24

I have always been a sports fan. When I was young, the sport of choice was, without a doubt, baseball. After all, I grew up in Cincinnati where baseball was and still might be king. I would listen to almost all of the Reds games or watch them, if that were possible. But my love affair with baseball was not limited to being a spectator of it. I played baseball. I pitched a no-hitter when I was in the fourth grade. It would have been a perfect game if my cousin Jimmy hadn't flubbed an easy ground out.

My playing baseball, though, was not limited to my being on a team in the Khoury League. I played baseball all the time at home. I had a pitchback, and I would make up games as I used it. My grandson Liam does the same thing with football and hockey. I would act as the announcer and would yell out things like "the 3-2 pitch." I have always loved 3-2 pitches. Ask my boys and my grandson. I still talk about 3-2 pitches. Three balls and two strikes.

Baseball was for me not just something to observe, to be a spectator of, but rather, to be a participant in. I couldn't help but think of that reality as I plumbed the depths of the readings for today and as I reflected on the meaning of this past week. Holy Week is not meant to be a spectator sport. It is an experience designed for participants. We start the week processing into Jerusalem with Jesus. We can't just watch the parade. We must participate in it. And we can't just emotionally stand at a distance from the story of Holy Week as the events unfold. Some of us cry. Most of us feel deeply as Jesus is betrayed, denied, made fun of, beaten, and then killed. Some of us think of our own experience with betrayal, denial, pain, and death. We're there with Jesus.

We're with him as we have our feet washed. Oh, we want to avoid the vulnerability. We want to stay at a distance. That foot

washing stuff is really odd. You can't believe how ugly my feet are. But Jesus says that if you want to get what he's up to, you must participate. You must become vulnerable.

Holy Week screams of participation. Paul in our second reading for today describes the Christian journey as a matter of participating in the very death and life of Jesus. The question is whether we should keep on sinning big time so that lots of grace may come forth. And Paul says, "Heck, no!" Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We have been buried with him by baptism into death."

The words "buried with him" signify that we share the same tomb with Jesus. We are in the same grave with him. We participate in his death. He does not say that we should or we could, if we only.... No, he says, we *do* share that grave. Those who have been baptized have gone into death, into the grave with Jesus. It's a done deal.

By the way, I think this kind of imagery from Paul may help us understand that those who practice baptism in big pools of water by means of immersion are on to something. In baptism, we are going deep into the waters. We're dying with Jesus. And we are being raised with him. "Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

Now it is interesting to me that Paul doesn't use the word "resurrection" to describe what happens to us in baptism. Resurrection is for him yet to come. In other words, there is more work to be done on you and me. We haven't arrived. To be baptized doesn't mean that the participation is over with, that the struggles are done. But it does mean that we walk now in newness of life. We don't just keep sinning, so that we get more grace.

No, that sinner identity has been put to death. We don't have to live on the basis of our bad selves. Those bad selves with their need to tear everybody else down, to make life all about us, to seek only money and power, to hold onto grudges and anger—those bad selves have been put to death. When you were baptized you were given a whole identity, so that you can participate in real life not on the basis of your bad selves, but on the basis of the selves that have been brought to new life—selves shaped by love, humility, patience, the desire to give and to bless, the desire to participate in the Easter life that has been given us.

The Gospel of John provides us a picture of that Easter life today, a picture that also speaks of our participation: “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.” Early in the morning, while it was still dark. Those of you who are showing up for the early service are participating in this visit. You are coming with Mary Magdalene. You are coming in the dark. You are expecting to find death. What else could there be at a tomb? Death is what graves are for. You arrive, and what you find is the stone covering the entrance to the tomb having been removed. Oh, you conclude, not that he has been raised but that the grave robbers must be at it again.

When you participate in this story, there are probably going to be lots of disappointments, many times you will wonder why you gave yourself over to the story. Why didn't you just spectate? Why did you give yourself over to love and end up being hurt? You understand why being a spectator is just easier. Sometimes it is much easier if you don't love, if you keep yourself protected, if you don't risk.

You reach out to some friends; call them Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved. You tell them about the robbery. They run to the tomb, competitive sorts that they are. Your friend, the disciple whom Jesus loved, arrives first. But your friend Peter enters the tomb first. These friends have always been jockeying for position. Peter sees the grave clothes. If the body had been stolen, the robbers in their hurriedness would probably have taken the wrappings with them. He sees them, but he doesn't respond. It's as if he is uncertain about it all. Your friend, the one whom Jesus loved, entered the tomb. He sees the grave clothes, and, we are told, he trusted. Trusted what? Mary's report about the grave robbing or the reality that Jesus has been raised? Who knows for sure? But he believes.

You . . . you still are upset. You stand outside of the tomb weeping, grieving. Could it get any worse than this? You then are met by someone you assume is the gardener. Who else would be here but the one who takes care of the tomb? This one, all of a sudden, names you, "Mary!" This one knows your name. You are not foreign to this one. The Good Shepherd knows the name of the sheep.

"Hush! Hush. Somebody's calling your name! Hush! Hush! Somebody's calling your name. Hush! Hush! Somebody's calling your name. Oh my Lawd. Oh my Lawdie, what shall I do?"

"Sounds like Jesus. Somebody's calling my name. Sounds like Jesus, somebody's calling my name. Sounds like Jesus, somebody's calling my name. Oh my Lawd. Oh my Lawdie, what shall I do?"

Somebody's calling your name! Resurrected life is calling your name. You don't get to hear this very often from me, but today it's about you; your name is being called. What shall you do?

You try to grab Jesus and hug him. It only makes sense. But no, he says. I am going to God. You can't grab me and hold me. You can't

keep me to yourself. I must be made available to all. Don't think that you have the corner on my resurrection market.

You know, I get it. Sometimes it is just easier to stay detached. Sometimes it is just easier to stand on the edge and watch the dance. I know you can get hurt, feel the depths of pain when you get involved, when you don't stand at a distance. I get it. It's easier to not participate in the procession, not get your feet washed, not experience vulnerability, not feel the feelings deeply, not show up at the tomb in the dark before it's light.

But what you experience when you enter this story, when you don't stand at a distance is somebody calling your name. And that somebody is not just anybody. That Somebody is the life of life itself. That somebody is the Lord, the Christ. That somebody is love! Love is calling you, Mary, you who are in deep grief and anxiety. Love is calling you, Peter, you who seems somewhat uncertain. Love is calling you, the one Jesus loved, who seems to be moving in the right direction, toward faith. The resurrection shows up for all of you, wherever you are. Love is calling everyone, all nations, Isaiah today tells us. Love is calling you, me, everybody and everything to a big party, the party of the finest food and drink, the party where death loses its power.

Folks, Christ is risen. Today we are getting a picture of the climax of history, a foretaste of the final future. It's the bottom of the ninth. The bases are loaded. And guess what? It's three balls and two strikes. Step up to the plate. Swing the bat. This faith stuff is too wonderful, too full of life, resurrection life for you, me, and everything, to stay out of the batter's box.