

“Can you hear me now?”
Acts 10:34-43 John 20:1-18

Before we begin the sermon this morning I would like to have sound check. Jesus Christ is risen today. Can you hear me now? (a little softer) Jesus Christ is risen today. Can you hear me now? (a little softer) Jesus Christ is risen today. Can you hear me now? (even a little softer) Jesus Christ is risen today. Can you hear me now? (even a little softer) Jesus Christ is risen today. Can you hear me now?

Being able to hear when we are spoken to is a vital part of communication. Verizon figured that out a couple years ago when they started their “Can you hear me now?” ad campaign. They realized that competition among cell phone companies was very competitive. Other companies were touting the advantages of the plans they offered, more minutes, greater flexibility, cheaper rates per minutes, carryover minutes, but Verizon decided to take the approach that the most important part of having a cell phone was not how many minutes were in your plan and not even how much those minutes were costing you, but the most important part of cell phone technology was actually being able to hear what was being said to you and being able to be heard by those whom you were calling.

Thus, they began their “Can you hear me now?” advertising campaign that we have become familiar with. The way John tells about the resurrection the visible evidence of the resurrection was seen by Mary Magdalene, the stone was rolled away from the tomb and she had no way to understand this new reality. She ran to get Peter and the other disciple and they investigated further, they went inside the tomb and saw further evidence, the linen wrappings, the cloth that had covered the face of Jesus, but they didn’t understand either and just went back to their homes.

It took a miracle of hearing for the resurrection to become real. Hearing is not something I take for granted these days, as I am beginning to experience some hearing loss, but as of yet I still have not made the move to go to get one of those little devices that many of you are very experienced with. I am asking a lot more questions about them and from what many of you tell me, there is no such thing as a perfect hearing aid. It sounds to me as if it is a “you can’t live with them and you can’t live without them” kind of device. I am sure I will experience them first hand sooner rather than later.

In our home we often have a conversation that goes something like this. I will say something and Christine will respond, “I can’t hear you.” Now, we have talked between us about what happens next. What doesn’t happen next is I don’t raise my volume when I repeat myself but I find where she is and I, intentionally lower my volume but speak more directly to her when I speak again and invariably she hears me the second time.

We have talked about this between ourselves and agree that it is a matter, not just of hearing loss, it is a matter of focus and being fully present to each other. It is a more attentive deeper listening that we find communicates most effectively.

I love the exuberance of Easter Sunday, all of the festivities, the bright colors, the fancy dresses, women wearing hats to worship, the Hallelujah chorus would sound weird indeed if it were whispered, but all the joy, all the hope, all the love we experience today has significance in direct proportion to the depth to which we are willing to listen and hear, deep within our hearts and souls. It is a kind of listening that has its own sense of timing, it can't be rushed and it cannot be coerced.

It is when the seeds of God's love in Christ Jesus are planted most deeply and nurtured most tenderly that we can experience their transformation most significantly in our lives. Perhaps the first word we need to hear to allow the resurrection to take root in our life is "Relax." Relax because God is in charge here. The tomb was empty and Jesus was raised before any of the Gospel characters appear on the scene. There is more than a little truth, and even though she does not realize it, much wisdom when Mary tells the disciples "We don't know" for not only doesn't she know where his body has been laid it is not possible for us to know the explanation for the resurrection. So the first word we need to hear is "relax."

Did you notice the competitiveness among the disciples. They not only ran to the tomb, they got into a race to see who would get there first. The beloved disciple arrived first, nothing wrong with that, but he seemed too timid to enter the tomb so when Peter gets there huffing and puffing, in his boldness he goes right in to the tomb. There is nothing wrong with competition and there is nothing wrong with boldness. Competition can give us the drive to excel; boldness can provide the momentum to seize the day, but the power of the resurrection is beyond both of those qualities.

The joy and love of the risen Christ has no need to be better or superior to anyone else. It has no need to prove anyone wrong or inferior; it has no anxiousness about it at all. The Resurrection is not about proving that our religion is better than another or superior to other faiths. It is about taking the time to listen to the depth of God's love.

It does take the time to deal with the question "Why?" Twice Mary Magdalene is asked "Why?" Both the angels dressed in white and Jesus ask here "Why are you weeping?" "Why" is always a personal question. When we are asked why we are asked to look at ourselves and our own personal motivations.

There is a very important assumption when we are asked the question "Why?" It is an assumption that asks a loving and growing maturity on our part. It is a growing maturity that asks us to realize that we are more than just what we feel

and experience. Our feelings are important and vital to our humanity, but we are more than our feelings. Mary is asked why she is weeping; the question assumes that there is more to her than her tears. It takes the grace of God to hear the question “why?” when it is asked of us.

Let me give you an example. I have been rereading a little book called To Love as God Loves.¹ In it the author tells of a woman who had had a great deal of difficulty with her mother over the years. Her mother had seemed to her to be harsh and overly critical and unloving, though this woman had wanted her love very badly. Then, when this woman was well into middle age she became acquainted with a new friend who had known her mother as a little girl. This friend told her things about the unhappiness of her mother’s childhood that she had never even suspected. It was a real epiphany for her for now she had a new desire to protect her mother and care for her. Because she had the courage to hear the “why” behind her mother’s behavior she was freed to see her mother not as the authority figure who had power over her but as another human being who was herself in need of gentleness and attention.

This transformation was far from automatic or instantaneous. It asked for grace upon grace. Mary Magdalene was not forced to stand weeping at the empty tomb. This woman could have angrily refused to let what she heard about her mother’s childhood touch her. Though grace was offered, it could have been rejected, but as it was this woman had the courage to listen more deeply. Mary Magdalene was given the grace to listen more deeply.

Easter offers that same grace to each of us. To our place of deepest need, the place that touches our weeping the risen Christ speaks softly to each of us, “Why are you weeping? For whom are you seeking?”

In faith, by the grace of God, and through the power of the Holy Spirit the Risen Christ speaks to each of you this morning calling you by name. Can you hear that love speaking your name?

This is not an experience we can achieve through any formula. It is not a potion that we can bottle. It is a gift, a pure gift given to all who are willing to receive and given to all who are willing to share as freely as they have received. That asks for a willingness to let God’s love bloom wherever it will.

It is a mistake to too quickly categorize our experiences in life into good and bad experiences, things that are depressing and painful from things that are exhilarating and pleasurable. Love is all about our capacity to experience the love of God and the love of neighbor in all of life. Our joy will always be superficial and transitory unless we are also willing to compassionately be present with those who suffer.

¹ To Love as God Loves by Roberta Bondi. Fortress Press, 1987. page 39-40.

One Christian author puts it this way, “God weeps with us so that we will be able to laugh with God.”²

This past season of Lent I have been amazed at how many expressions of incredible love, joyful service, and God given creative expression I have been privileged to experience right here in this congregation and in this community. I have decided to give God all the glory.

One Sunday I was sitting in on Wendy’s Sunday School Class. At the end of class Calvin Leader stood up and said that he would like to share a poem. He seemed to me to be speaking softly so I had to cup my ear to hear him. It was well worth the effort. This week I visited with he and his wife Rose. Calvin told me that in his professional life he had been a superintendent of public schools and that he needed to be prepared to give motivational talks on many occasions. He never considered himself much of a storyteller so he found that when he memorized poems people would listen to him.

I spent a very enjoyable hour in their home listening to some of his repertoire, and he very graciously agreed to conclude this Easter sermon with a rendition of a poem titled “Perspective” by Ivan Fitzwater. (Unfortunately, this past Friday Cal’s wife Rose fell and is currently in the hospital so I will do my best to share this poem with you.

I had to walk to town that day,
 A long and rugged road.
 This angered me for my feet hurt,
 And I shouldered a heavy load.
 Then I saw a little boy
 With a crutch where one leg should be.
 He stood alone on the school house lawn,
 And he smiled as he waved at me.
 I smiled through tears as I raised my hand
 And continued on with my chore,
 But my feet didn’t hurt, though I quickened my pace,
 And the road wasn’t rough anymore.

A dazzling sunset bathed the sky
 At the end of a summer’s day,
 Preoccupied, I gave but a glance
 And I started to turn away
 Its only a sunset, is that so great?
 Why I’ve seen a thousand or more,
 And then a blind man beside me asked,
 “Are the colors as bright as before?”
 As I described to a sightless man

² Philip Yancey in Christianity Today

The things he could not see
The awesome beauty I would have missed
Was no longer hidden from me.

Lord, let me know the message these events
are meant to give:
I must show that I am grateful,
By the loving way I live,
Not complaints or petty grievances
For the bumps and scrapes of life,
Not enlarging little problems
'til they loom like major strife,
and when I'm adding up the balance,
it must come as no surprise,
I have reason to be joyous,
I have legs and I have eyes.

And in the miracle of Easter we each can hear
The Lord Jesus Christ calling each of us by name.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Rev Stephen Hoffman
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