

April 19, 2020

"A Divine Reboot"

John Wesley United Methodist Church

John 20:19, 24-29

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

I'm going to start off today with a little humor. It's about a man, who is very much alive, but believes that he is dead. So his wife takes him, against his will, to see a psychiatrist. When the man enters the psychiatrist's office, he stands stiffly at the doctor's desk. "I'm here against my will," he states. "My family forced me here to talk about my problem. But I don't have a problem because I'm dead." The psychiatrist observed the patient for a moment and said, "Let me ask you, do dead people bleed?" Quickly the man answered, "No, it's impossible for dead people to bleed." Immediately the psychiatrist pulled a needle from out of his desk drawer, grabbed the man's hand, and pricked his finger. A tiny dot of blood appeared. "Well, what do you know," said the patient said. "Dead people do bleed."

Now rather than believe in the obvious – that he was alive, the man continued to doubt that fact. And in today's Scripture, we hear the classic story of doubt. That of "Doubting Thomas." We're all familiar with the story: his initial skepticism and refusal to believe; and then the appearance of Christ, and his declaration of joy as Thomas cries out, "My Lord and my God!" Now there's an important lesson here which I'll get back to at the end of my sermon. But for the moment, there's a corollary to this story I want to address. And that is, have you ever doubted like Thomas? Have you ever doubted in the existence of the risen Lord or his promises? Now my guess is that all of us at one time or another, have doubted or questioned or, even dismissed God. Humankind has this inclination to do that, especially when things go wrong or fear confronts us. Like what's happening with the coronavirus. So, as I was doing my research for today's sermon, I found some interesting things I'd like to share with you.

The first comes from the famous French scientist and philosopher, Blaise Pascal. He's probably most well-known for his philosophical argument called "Pascal's Wager." Now the concept of the wager is that every human being bets with their life that God either exists, or that God does not exist. Pascal argues that any rational person should live as though God exists and should seek to believe in God. Because, if, at the end of life, God doesn't exist, such a person would have experienced only a relatively few minor inconveniences or losses in this mortal life. But if God does exist, that same person will stand to receive infinite joy and eternal gain in heaven. On the other hand, if a person lives as though God doesn't exist, and, in the end, finds that he does, well, you can imagine the consequences. So, how might this relate to what we're going through now? Well, as I watch the press conferences, all the news

and talk shows, even all the new feel good television advertisements that are appearing, I find one thing consistently missing; God. I find the need for God and for prayer is hardly, if ever, acknowledged. Yes, I wholeheartedly applaud the praise and trust we are giving our scientists and researchers and first responders and healthcare workers. But the thing is, it makes it appear the only way we're going to get through this, is on our own and through our own devices. It's almost as though our society and world is wagering that God doesn't really exist. That's why I believe more of us need to come together and express our faith and trust in God and in the power of prayer. Because only then can we move God's hand and affect the fate and well-being of this nation. I think of God's words to the Israelites: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

Now Pascal is also recognized for his many philosophical quotations. And one in particular intrigues me during this time of self-quarantine and being sequestered in our homes. He says, "Most of humanity's troubles come from our inability to sit quietly in a room alone." There's great truth to that statement, isn't there? "Most of humanity's troubles come from our inability to sit quietly in a room alone." Because just look around. In our culture today we're constantly bombarded with information. Some of it is relevant, but so much is repetitive and a lot of it is just plain minutiae. In addition, we're used to having so many diversions at our disposal. Our phones, restaurants, sports, movies, travel, and much more. And these all take up so much of our time and energy. Now, here we are with the opportunity to just sit quietly in a room alone with none of these things. And what might happen? Well, we might meditate more deeply on the profound questions philosophers have asked through the ages, that we've never taken the time to think about. Questions about God and creation and our lives. Questions like, "Who am I, really?" "What is my purpose in life?" "What do I need to change?" "Why do bad things happen?" "Where is God in all of this?" And many more. Yes, this coronavirus has us at home alone, effectively sitting quietly in our rooms. What a rare and beautiful opportunity this can provide us. For...could this possibly be a time for us to reboot our lives? Make some changes? Let me share with you a poem by Irene Vella entitled, "And the people stayed home."

*And the people stayed home.
And read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games,
and learned new ways of being, and they were still.
And they listened more deeply.
Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows.
And the people began to think differently.
And the people healed.
And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways,
the earth began to heal.
And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses,
and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live
and heal the earth fully...as they had been healed.*

Yes, maybe it's time for a reboot – a Divine reboot. Because before Pascal offered his sage advice, Jesus told us this: “When you pray, go away by yourself to your room, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.” Maybe it's time to rethink, or think more deeply about that 'power of prayer,' and the way in which we personally connect with God. To help, let me offer three thoughts about prayer and its rewards. First, when you pray, be thankful. Gratitude for your blessings, big and small, conveys your love for God and it nurtures other virtues like humility and joy. And the reward is that gratitude insures God will continue to bless you. Second, when you pray, be persistent. Time and time again, Jesus told us to do this. You see, persistency conveys a trust in God – you keep asking because you trust that he will answer, albeit in his time and in his way. And the reward is peace – knowing that God will either remove your problem, or take you through it. And third, remember, sometimes God's greatest reward is his silence. Time means nothing to God. So his silence can be a sign that he is bringing you into a wonderful understanding of himself and the assurance of a greater revelation – sometime in the future.

Now I want to close by going back to Thomas and the risen Christ and the reason he doubted in the first place. And it's probably the reason so many of us doubt as well. Rev. Eugene Bay explains it best and puts it all into perspective. He says, “Easter began as a rumor and was responded to with doubt and unbelief. The problem, you see, was that there were no witnesses to the actual resurrection. In this regard Easter was, and still is, so different from Good Friday. Good Friday was public: the betrayal, the procession to Calvary, the cry of anguish from Jesus on the cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Good Friday is a time and place we humans find easy to understand and easy to live in. So, compared to Good Friday, Easter only retains the status of rumor. No one was there to observe. The women reported an empty tomb. Later it was said some people had seen Jesus, only it didn't look

like him exactly. And before anybody could do much in the way of verification, he was gone. Yet the rumor of the risen Christ continues today. The world has never been able to get rid of him. It's not for lack of trying. Like I said earlier, the world ignores him, ridicules him, doubts him. But despite all this, I urge you to keep your eyes open for him. Sometimes when you are mired in grief, he will appear to you. When you need the grace of forgiveness, or the strength to forgive, he will come to you. When all around you is darkness and the road ahead is uncertain as it is for all of us now, he will be there for you. In sadness and joy, in the company of believers, in the breaking of the bread, in the word read and spoken, in the splendor of a hymn, and in quietness of your prayers, he will make himself known to you. In one way or another he will knock at the door of your life, and if you let him, he will come in. Then, and only then, will you know that the rumor is true.¹ And like Pascal, you will have won the wager. And like Thomas you will cry out, "My Lord and my God". Amen.

¹ A Rumor of Resurrection, Eugene C Bay