New Life After Religious Trauma

LUKE 24:1-9 (NRSVUE) *But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared.* [2] *They found the stone rolled away from the tomb,* [3] *but when they went in they did not find the body.* [4] *While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them.* [5] *The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen.* [6] *Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee,* [7] *that the Son of Man must be handed over to the hands of sinners and be crucified and on the third day rise again."* [8] *Then they remembered his words,* [9] *and returning from the tomb they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.*

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The Word of God for the people of God!

It's the second Sunday of Easter, so we're still focusing on resurrection; but I'm not going to get involved with any kind of literal vs. metaphoric debate. Some of the worst atrocities in human history have emerged out of those kinds of distinctions and the claims of absolute knowledge or authority used to enforce them.

Let me set the context: resurrection—new life—presupposes death. I don't understand death. I've seen it, from the roadside ditches in Vietnam to the quiet sanctity of a hospital room with a family gathered around a bed; I've held people's hands as they left on that journey; but I've not been there. I have an understanding of grief. I've been there myself, and I've walked that "lonesome valley" with more people than I can remember. I know there is hope of healing—for those who grieve. The scars remain; and sometimes the pain is recurring; but new life is possible.

Sometimes new life comes after encountering a medical or psychological challenge. Again, I don't understand the medical or psychological diagnosis or treatment. I do recognize some of the symptoms. I recognize the names of some of the disorders and challenges, and some of the triggers that set them off. Again, I don't understand the process; but I know people who do. And I have seen healing.

One of the things I do understand is the Christian faith; and perhaps my greatest understanding is that my understanding is limited. Astrophysicist Neil DeGrasse Tyson said the greatest knowledge produced by science is that we don't know everything.

That's confusing in a society that increasingly sets its anchor on absolutes. The truth is, we don't know bean dip about God—for sure. What we have are multiple testimonies from those who have experienced God, and their testimonies are like the four blind mice who encountered an elephant. The first mouse encountered the elephant's tail, and said, "Ah! The elephant is like a rope!"

The second mouse encountered the elephant's side and declared, "Oh, no! The elephant is like a wall!"

The third mouse ran into the elephant's trunk and said, "Pshaw! Can't you guys see that the elephant is like a fire hose?

The fourth mouse found the elephant's leg and said, "You heretics should be burned at the stake for spreading lies! The elephant obviously is like a tree!"

And see, here's the thing: all four were correct! But none of them was complete. The elephant was much more than any of the mice perceived; indeed, the elephant was infinitely more than all four testimonies combined.

Now, over the past several weeks, you probably have picked up that I'm a fan of Astrophysicist Neil DeGrasse Tyson. In many interviews he's asked about God, and his consistent response is that if your concept of a creator is of a being that is all benevolent and all powerful, and you then look at natural disasters, volcanoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, disease, congenital health defects… this whole list of ways human life is made miserable, and I just ask, how do you deal with that?

One of the most articulate humans on the planet defines God and then, based on his definition—his perspective of the elephant—says, "The more I study the universe, the less evidence I see of an all good, all powerful being in charge."

His conclusion is one variation of a classic argument called a theodicy. It asks, essentially, how can a loving, benevolent God allow suffering? Classic attempts to resolve the question date all the way back to Irenaeus in the second century. Again, each of them lifts up a partial truth, but none are finally or absolutely convincing.

And there are many other problematic issues that continue to divide the Christian faith with partial-but-incomplete truths:

- Creation: the biblical narratives vs. science—it's a false dichotomy.
- The nature of Jesus of Nazareth: was he human or divine?
- Second Coming of Christ: apocalyptic or like a thief in the night?
- Eternal Life: Literal, with streets of gold and walls of jasper?

And the sad thing is that these issues reflect typical human divisiveness more than Christianity: is the Bible literal or metaphor? Do we interpret the Constitution strictly or more loosely; are we ethical legalists or situational ethicists?

Fundamentalists didn't declare the Bible to be inerrant until the 19th century. It was about the same that the Catholics declared the Pope to be infallible. So, how did Christianity survive 1,800 years without those appeals to absolute authority?

What happened? Well, the Enlightenment happened[1]! All over Europe—especially in English, French, and German-speaking countries—people were noticing that evidence didn't always line up with what they were being told. Evidence suggests the sun doesn't rotate around the earth—and the earth isn't flat. Evidence suggests life evolved from a single source and mutates into many varied expressions and species.

People in authority didn't take it well when their "because I said so" was

[1] Adapted from Richard Rohr, "Absolute Authority & Inner Authority." YouTube.

questioned (always worked for my Dad). The fear of hell had always kept the riff-raff in line, so what worked with heretics in the Inquisition ought to work with upstarts who claim the world isn't flat. Right?

In our Maundy Thursday service I made reference to Arthur Miller's play, "The Crucible." It confronts the human tendency toward intolerance and hysteria. Set in the context of the Salem witch trials in Massachusetts Bay in the late 17th century, the play was an allegory for McCarthyism in post-WWII America. Predictably, Miller was summoned before the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

The play highlights how intolerance and hysteria combined with theocratic power lead to inhumane treatment of people. People lose their freedom and lives if they don't conform to prescribed norms because people are swept away by fear and anxiety.

So, religious trauma's not new. And it virtually always is the product of religious absolutism, when the church assumes power over the people. The church is just beginning to acknowledge it and to team up with helping professions to deal effectively with it. There's a lot of people wandering around claiming to be "Spiritual but not religious;" and I believe there's a lot of religious trauma in that culture.

Religious trauma is defined as "the emotional and psychological distress resulting from harmful religious experiences, such as spiritual abuse, rigid dogma, ostracism, or toxic religious environments. It can impact an individual's physical, emotional, and mental well-being."

So, how do we make a difference? We're just a small congregation—the best-kept secret in town, occupying a non-descript building in a low-income section of town. What can we do? There's a medical principle: "First, do no harm." Don't be part of the problem. What if we offered a seminar or workshop or class—some venue to learn the elements of toxic religion, and work to eliminate them. Would you participate? What if we offered it to the churches in the community? (Of course, if we did that, it might jeopardize our status as "best kept secret in town.")

On the other hand, there's the idea that, "If you're not part of the solution, you *are* part of the problem." The logo on top of our church web page is, "A Safe Place to Explore Your Faith." In recent months there's been a significant political flap over "Sanctuary Cities." Our culture is full of spiritual refugees who just need a sanctuary. What if we offered a seminar or workshop or class—some venue to learn about effective ways to minister to these spiritual refugees? What if we offered it to the churches in our community? A new model for evangelism?

I believe in resurrection. I don't understand it; but I believe in new life after all forms and expressions of death. I believe in new life after religious trauma.

Pray with me.