

Awakening to Second Chances

A sermon in the Easter-Pentecost series “Spring Awakenings”

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- Romans 13:11b The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. (NIV)
- Luke 24:1-12 ²They found the stone rolled away from the entrance to the tomb, ³so they went in; but they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴They stood there puzzled about this.... (vv. 2-4a)
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: We can be God’s gracious instruments of second chances when we extend our forgiveness.

On February 10th of this year commercial fisherman Nick Haworth and his crew were working the waters two miles off the shore of San Clemente Island in southern California. Nick’s 1½ year-old German Shepherd, a puppy named Luna, was aboard as usual... until suddenly and inexplicably, Luna disappeared. Vanished. Presuming she fell overboard, Nick and his crew stopped collecting their traps in order to look for Luna. They phoned the office of the Naval Auxiliary Landing Field on San Clemente Island in case Luna decided to swim to shore.

No luck. Nick and his crew stayed at sea for two more days of searching, and the Navy scoured the shore for a week, but their task was made more difficult because the dog’s coat matched the muted tans and browns of San Clemente Island’s rocky shoreline. Eventually reality set in and the pup was presumed dead.

“But five weeks later, as Navy staff headed to work, they spotted Luna sitting next to the road.... When the pooch saw [the officers], she ran right up to them.... Luna was examined by a Navy wildlife biologist who found her to be undernourished but otherwise unharmed. The pup was in ‘good spirits.’”

The Navy flew Luna to a nearby naval air station where a glad reunion eventually took place between dog and owner. In Nick’s mind, his dog had died, but had come back to life.¹

That’s a resurrection we can explain.

The resurrection of Jesus, we can’t.

We can’t explain how a tomb unsealed itself. We can’t explain how a cold corpse completely devoid of life could once again find its heart pumping and nerves tingling and muscles flexing and lungs billowing. There’s no rational explanation for the reanimation of a man who had been executed nearly two full days earlier.

There’s no rational explanation for the resurrection of Jesus. But the explanation doesn’t rest on reason. It rests on faith. It was a faith that even the apostles and other followers of Jesus had difficulty embracing at first.

¹ “U.S. Navy Finds Puppy Thought to Be Lost at Sea; Luna, a German Shepherd, went missing at sea on Feb. 10 and was presumed dead for nearly five weeks” reported by Omari Fleming, NBC-7 Television News, San Diego, California, published at 9:15 AM PDT on Mar 16, 2016

- The women who went to the tomb were surprised when they found it open and empty, and they didn't understand what had happened.
- Peter and the other apostles didn't understand when the women came to them to report finding the tomb empty.
- Nor did they believe the women's report that heavenly messengers had reminded them that Jesus himself had predicted this death-to-life resurrection.
- Peter couldn't stand it—he got up and ran to the tomb to see for himself that it had been opened and vacated. The Bible says “he went back home amazed at what had happened.”² Did he understand? I doubt it. But did he *believe*...?

We can't explain what happened when Jesus was raised from death to life. But that's how God is: God's ways soar far beyond our abilities to understand. I mean,

- we can't explain how God designed teeny-tiny atoms to be the building blocks of everything that exists;
- despite our scientific understanding of climate change, still we can't explain how we could experience among the coldest and warmest winters on record in consecutive years;
- we can't explain how the human being is capable of showing immense compassion on the one hand or unspeakable cruelty on the other.

So if you feel the least bit unworthy because you're here to celebrate an event of religious and historic significance that you just don't understand, all I can say is, “It's all right. Not one of us can explain it. But each of us can embrace it—each of us can embrace that in the resurrection of Jesus God is announcing a ‘second chance.’”

Now, the second chance isn't for Jesus. The resurrection is not about Jesus having a second chance to tell one more parable, having a second chance to change water into an even better wine, having a second chance to stroll across surface of the Sea of Galilee.

The “second chance” made possible by Christ's resurrection is a second chance for you and me. God first sent Jesus the Son to live among us to show us how the lives we lead can be dedicated to serving God's will. In perfect obedience to God, Jesus willingly took the blame for humanity's sinfulness. As the scapegoat for humanity's fears, his earthly life was silenced, ended, through an act of unspeakable cruelty: he was put to death on a cross.

A night passed. Then a day. Another night... enough time so it would be beyond dispute: Jesus was dead. That's when God-in-Jesus shed the trappings of death and returned to the world of the living.

But how did his new lease on life give us a “second chance?” Recall what Jesus said while he was hanging by spikes hammered into the cross. At one point he prayed for the sake of his accusers and executioners. He said, “Forgive them, Father! They don't know what they are doing.”³

Forgiveness offers an example of one kind of “second chance.” When we realize that out of immense mercy God has already forgiven us our shortcomings and wrongs,

² Luke 24:12b Good News translation

³ Luke 23:34 Good News translation

we discover we've been given a clean slate on which to begin writing a new story of our lives.

What's more, once we realize that we have a "second chance" because God has forgiven us, it occurs to us that we, in turn, can grant someone else a "second chance." We can create "second chances" for others by offering our forgiveness for the hurt they caused by whatever offense they willingly or unknowingly committed.

- The sting of words spoken long ago can be soothed by graciously extending the olive branch of forgiveness.
- Hardship caused by a selfish action can be put in the past through forgiveness.
- That chasm separating former friends — or relatives — can be bridged by reaching out with forgiveness.

But let's be frank here: extending the offer of forgiveness can be hard to do. We wonder if we can trust. We worry we'll be taken advantage of. We have doubts about whether our offer will be accepted with appreciation, or will cause us to be subjected to ridicule. So we ask God for the courage to take the risk. We risk offering forgiveness because forgiving someone is the first step toward being reconciled, brought together again.

For about the next two months our worship will focus on the theme of "Spring Awakening." Just as the flora and fauna of Earth awaken with the coming of spring, we'll use this spring to explore how our faith calls us to awaken to new possibilities in action and in relationships. In Romans Chapter 13 St. Paul urges us to adopt a new urgency in living into the consequences of our faith. He wrote, "The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed."⁴

This year the familiar story of Easter prompts us to consider how we can awaken to second chances. God gave Jesus new life after certain death. Jesus himself prayed for second chances for the people who hated him, second chances for the people who hurt him, and second chances even for those who until then had ignored him. By rising from the grave Jesus shows that there is power in having an opportunity for a second chance. He shows that God gives us the power to offer second chances. People, or groups, or even institutions that have caused us pain will be blessed and changed by forgiveness. We can be God's gracious instruments of second chances when we extend to others the forgiveness that we have received from God.

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⁴ Romans 13:11b New International Version