

Preachers: Tim and Audrey Hollenberg-Duffey

Scripture: Matthew 5:10-12

Happy Easter. After a long Lenten season, we've arrived at the day of resurrection, a day of joy. Christ the Lord is risen today and all of creation seems to be celebrating with the beauty of this day. We've been studying the Beatitudes for the past six Sundays and maybe you were hoping that the culminating Beatitude would go out on a cheery note. But then we get this complicated doozy—"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake." Happy Easter everyone: blessed are the persecuted. This Beatitude doesn't seem to match our joyful spirits, but it is deeply rooted in the Easter story.

Persecution is a reality in this world. This past week we've seen persecution as we walked through Holy Week. Jesus arrived in Jerusalem to shouts of Hosanna! But the religious leaders were not impressed and quickly began plotting to arrest and kill him. Eventually, they convinced one of Jesus' own to betray him and sent an angry mob to arrest him. They flogged him, stripped him, mocked him, beat him, and sent him carrying his own crossbeam to the hill to be hung on that cross until dead. We have seen persecution this week — capital punishment of a man who preached the hard truth of love for all people, to proclaim hope and grace to those who formerly had none.

We saw persecution in the Jesus story this week, but we also saw it just last Sunday as Egyptian Coptic Christians were killed while attending their Palm Sunday Worship Services. At least 49 killed and about one hundred wounded. Attacked because of their identity as Christians and their attendance in worship.

Around the world, I think Christians understand persecution far more than we do. I have learned a lot about persecution as I've read and heard stories from our Nigerian Brethren throughout the past three years. The call for prayers for the missing Chibok girls still goes out. The third anniversary of their abduction was April 14, and the reality that these girls likely will never come home is striking. In our own congregation, we heard stories of killings from members of the Nigerian Choir that sang in our sanctuary. We could see their pain, hear their sorrow. These examples are a reminder that we don't experience persecution like the rest of the world does. It's not about playing a game to see who had the worst day. It's not about earning pity or a badge of honor in the name of Jesus. Persecution is what Jesus experiences on the cross. We witnessed it just this week. Persecution is the power of evil, destruction, and even death. It's a reality in our world.

Persecution is the world's response to righteousness and love. Our Beatitude for today tells us that those who do the work of righteousness will most likely meet opposition. It is like trying to walk in the opposite direction of the majority of people in a crowded place. It can be like walking through deep mud or trying to wade upstream in a fast-moving current or trying to walk against a rough blowing wind. Going against the flow is difficult. It's uncomfortable and takes a lot of effort. Doing the right thing for the Kingdom of God often feels like walking with the wind blowing violently in our face.

When Jesus first arrived in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, it felt at first like he wasn't walking against the crowd much at all. In fact, it was quite the opposite: a crowd welcomed him and ushered him into their city with palm-covered roads, acting as though his donkey were truly a royal steed. There was no going against the crowd until they heard him speak. And when he started turning over the tables on the temple mount, when he continued preaching a truth against the religious leaders' wishes, when he refused to buddy up to the right powerful people – then

the walk against the crowd was most noticeable. Then he was fully trekking against the current with the wind in his face. Jesus chose not popular opinion but righteousness and hard love. The world's response to this was persecution. The world's response, the crowd's response, became "Crucify him!" This is the way the world responds to righteousness and love when it goes against the status quo.

Regardless, we are called to righteousness and love. Our Nigerian Brethren know this calling well. They have continued to grow the church and the message of Christ's love even as they face violence. In a recent Newsline article, Markus Gamache, who is a leader in the EYN Church, shared about how the church has continued to support and evangelize to Nigerian refugees in Cameroon. He wrote: "The refugee camp is a world of its own. There is no end to the camp, to human eyes. It is very large and over populated. The current population is about 32,948 Christians, and a total estimated number of Muslims of about 15,000. Out of this number, our church has up to 16,728 members. Up to 13 places of worship belonging to EYN are within the refugee camp." Even though the church continues to be a persecuted group, those who are willing to risk their lives for the message of Christ have only continued to grow.

We are in a place of privilege where we don't have to worry about this type of persecution. But righteousness and love is still our calling. When the world rushes to judgment, the righteous are called to grace. When the world seeks retaliation and revenge, the righteous are called to reconciliation. When the world seeks to separate and splinter us from one another, the righteous seek solidarity and understanding. When the world wants to ostracize the betrayer, the righteous bow down and wash the betrayer's feet. When the world belittles someone, the righteous welcome them in.

When Jesus first named his ministry goals in his home town of Nazareth, he was thrown out of town and almost hurled off a cliff. Quoting Isaiah, he had said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And Jesus lived out this mission of love as he healed those who were broken in body and spirit, forgave those the world couldn't forgive, fellowshiped with the unclean. He didn't stop ministering even when people began to threaten his very life. Likewise, **you** are called to pursue righteousness and love regardless of your fears because the hope of resurrection casts out all fear. The world looks at the cross and sees defeat, death, destruction and weakness. The world sees an end. But we are people of resurrection. We don't see death, but new life. We don't see an end, but a hopeful beginning. We don't see a period, but a comma. We don't see a tomb, but a cocoon. Christ has defeated death; therefore, we have nothing to fear in this world. There is nothing worthy of our fear and anxiety in this life.

Is there a bolder statement than "We have nothing to fear." You can hearken back to FDR's famous line: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," but Jesus made the statement first. Repeatedly, he told his disciples not to be afraid, and yet now they can fully understand why. Because, the world used the best option they had in their persecution arsenal to stop Jesus from preaching his message of love and righteousness, they put him to death. But death couldn't defeat Jesus. Not even death was enough to put his message in its place; instead he is risen and so is his message on this Easter Sunday. He is risen and he has invited all of us to join in his eternal kingdom, stripping death of its power over us. We need not even fear death because Jesus has mocked even death itself.

In some denominations, it is a practice for preachers to begin their Easter sermons with some holy humor. Doris Donnelly writes: “Since the most extravagant ‘joke’ of all took place on Easter Sunday -- the victory, against all odds, of Jesus over death -- the community of the faithful enters into the spirit of the season by sharing stories with unexpected endings, surprise flourishes and a sense of humor.” As Robert Atwell says, “The empty tomb and resurrection are seen as God’s great joke on the world. We laugh and sing because that is what God is doing today in raising Jesus from the dead.”

So, in that spirit, here is a cute and possibly familiar story: A little boy and his mother, shopping for Easter candies and decorations, ran into their minister in the store. Mom and the Reverend exchanged a little chit-chat. Then the Reverend looked at little Johnny and asked, “So, what are you up to today?” “Oh,” Johnny said, “We’re getting ready for Easter!” Seeing a pedagogical opportunity, the Reverend replied “Oh really? Hey, just what exactly is Easter anyway? Do you know what happened on Easter?” Little Johnny looked at the Reverend a little offended. “Of course, I know what Easter is. It’s when Jesus went to Jerusalem, and he rode a donkey, and they waved palms at him.” “That’s right, go on” said the reverend. “And he got in trouble and he was beat up and yelled at and then they nailed him on a cross and then he died.” “Very good Johnny! What happened next?” “Well then they put him in a tomb and they put a big rock in front of it. But three days later he got raised and got out of there.” “Johnny, that’s great!” said the Reverend, pleased to know his Sunday School program worked so well. “But that’s not all” said Johnny. “Oh,” said the Reverend, “What else?” “Well, the rock got rolled back, and he stepped out, and he looked around, and if he sees his shadow there’s six more weeks of winter.”

Was that the surprise ending you were looking for? I wonder if we’ve become too familiar with the real Easter story that the ending doesn’t catch us off guard anymore like Johnny’s story does? But the Easter ending is much better than Jesus seeing his shadow; it is love amazing. May the Easter story shock and amaze you today as if you were hearing it for the first time. May it strike in you an occasion to smile, sing, even laugh, for Jesus just surprised the world. And do not be afraid. The good news of Easter is that death is defeated, death has lost its sting. The death of death is your encouragement to take up your own cross, follow Jesus, and be blessed.

Throughout Lent, we have discovered that to receive blessings, we must be like Jesus who embodied each Beatitude - a humble and meek person who openly mourned, sought righteousness and purity of heart and who extended mercy and peace. We share the joy of Easter and our risen Lord as we follow in his footsteps to build the upside-down Kingdom. So, go be people of the Beatitudes. Go be the people of resurrection. Go be a blessed people.