

Practicing Resurrection
A Different Kind of Strength
Matthew 5:3-11

You know those conversations we're having these days that all sound kind of the same?

How are you doing?

Fine, I guess.

What have you been doing?

I went to the grocery store once. Mask and gloves. One-way aisles.

Was your week OK?

Yeah. Pretty much the same as last week. Every day is the same.

One of the things I've been saying in those conversations in the last few weeks is how disorienting this time is. It feels to me like so many of the markers in my life—things that remind me of who I am, what my place is in the world, even *where* I am—have gotten obscured, muffled. I feel almost dizzy in my wandering from day to day. Every day is the same as the day before; nothing is the same as it used to be; what day is this, anyway?

We can start to feel kind of lost; like we're floating in a very large ocean with no land in sight. I wonder if you're feeling that way too.

When you are lost, you just need a few things to hold on to. Firm, unmoving, concrete things that will help you find your way in the dark, help you hold on as long as you need to until this world starts to resemble home again.

That's what I think the Beatitudes might be for us today—this first part of the biggest, longest, most important sermon Jesus ever preached; the sermon where he said most clearly to the people who were following him, 'You know that kingdom of God I'm always talking about? This is what it looks like.' Handholds. Road markers. Small things that will remind us that even when we feel very far away from home, we will find our way back.

For a few weeks we're going back to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount with new eyes; trying to imagine how the people who knew Jesus would have done the same thing after that first Easter. We're imagining they went back to the things maybe they took for granted when he was here, looking for some meaning they might have missed before. Because Easter—that day Jesus' body was supposed to stay inert in a tomb where they put dead people and then it didn't—that threw them into an unfamiliar landscape. Life was not what they thought it was. They felt confused and disoriented, unsure about who they were and what they were supposed to do next. Maybe a little like we feel now.

In those first weeks after Easter, a whole bunch of things happened that surprised and confused them. The resurrected Jesus kept showing up. Lots of people had some experience that felt like they actually saw him. But it was always in the oddest places. Not when they were praying, or in church. Never when they were feeling particularly spiritual. Jesus always—only—showed up while they were doing ordinary things, everyday life, like

- when they locked themselves in a room to talk about how scared they were;
- when two of them were walking home for dinner on the same dusty road they'd walked on a hundred times before;
- when were out in their boat fishing and had a bad night, couldn't catch a single fish.

Instead of talking to them about spiritual things, Jesus would say things like,

'I'm hungry. Do you have anything to eat around here?'

'That was really hard. Take a look at my scars.'

'Let me cook you breakfast.'

'You've got to forgive people. You just have to.'

Even after he'd had this unbelievably spiritual experience, lived an only-God-could-do-that kind of miracle, Jesus seemed to be interested mostly in the everyday stuff of ordinary human life. *Their* everyday stuff. *Their* ordinary human lives.

What if that had been true all along? What if all those times they thought Jesus was talking about sweeping them up into some blissful, other-worldly life, that wasn't what he was saying at all? What if he really had been, all along, concerned about how you care for your family, and how you do your work, and loving your actual neighbors? Maybe they needed to go back and hear it again.

Maybe we do too.

Here's how we have usually heard the Beatitudes:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn...

Blessed are the meek...

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...and the merciful, and the pure in heart...and the peacemakers.

Blessed are those who are persecuted...

And I wonder if you have thought, as I have, 'Well, that leaves me out. I'm not always merciful, and I wonder all the time if I'm pure in heart. I've never really been persecuted. I'm not even sure I want to be poor in spirit, or mournful, or meek. If Jesus was saying you have to be those things—that I have to try to make myself somebody way more spiritual than I actually am—so that I can be blessed...then I might be out of this game. This might not be for me.'

But that Jesus who went for a walk on the first afternoon of his resurrected life, the one who went to hell and back and then came and cooked breakfast for his friends on a beach and shouted fishing advice—that Jesus makes me wonder if we've been making something out of his words that he never meant at all.

I don't think *that* Jesus was saying you have to turn yourself into an angelic being to qualify for God's blessing. That God will only bless you if you can make yourself so spiritual that you like being sad, that you never stand up for yourself, that you're always more hungry for righteousness than you are for a burger.

I think that Jesus was saying, ‘When you know God is in this life with you, when God-with-you is as real to you as I am now sitting here on a rock, then you are blessed. You’re so blessed—so loved by God—that even when you are sad and lonely and lost, even when you feel absolutely powerless and mostly misunderstood, even when all you see when you look around is a hundred ways the world is broken and hopeless, even then you can be sure that God is in it with you. That God can take even a world that looks like *that* and make it into something that is a blessing.

Jesus wasn’t prescribing a spiritual life for his followers. He was describing a human life with God in it. The Beatitudes aren’t asking us to become so spiritual we remove ourselves from the ups and downs of this life. They’re about what God can do when we make room for God to come into this life. Our lives. Our real, everyday, hungry, scared, not-sure-what-to-do-next lives.

Listen to how Eugene Peterson has re-phrased a few of these Beatitudes that Jesus spoke:

You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.

You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.

You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for.

You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world. (Matthew 5:3-9, *The Message*)

Those Beatitudes are supposed to sound like good news to us. That’s what Jesus meant them to be.

But here’s the thing about these generous, full-of-promise Beatitudes: they’re not just for us. Matthew’s story says that this sermon began when Jesus took his disciples, a few people he knew and trusted and was close to, up a mountain. He had some important things he wanted to tell them. Before the sermon got very far, though, Matthew remembers that a crowd had gathered, that there were lots of people who could overhear what Jesus was saying. Every one of those listeners that day—the disciples whose names we know and the anonymous faces in the crowd, the people who thought of themselves as followers of Jesus and the ones who were on their way somewhere else and just stopped for a minute to see why a crowd had gathered—all of them needed the blessing Jesus was offering. And all of them got it.

But maybe the message was different for the disciples, the people who were sitting in the front row seats. Maybe Jesus’ message to them included some words that didn’t make it into Matthew’s Gospel: ‘You see all those people sitting behind you, all those people who need to be blessed just as much as—maybe even more than—you do? Make sure this is a world where they can find—where they can see—God’s blessing too. Can you do that? For me?’

