

*Theology for Thinking People: Resurrection*

Mark 10:17-22, 46-52

In evangelical churches, often people are advised to choose a single verse from the Bible and make it their own. They claim it. They know these will be the words that God will use to speak directly to them their whole life long. Sometimes it can be a claim of God's special favor, which might make you roll your eyes a little. But it can also work something like a touchstone, a few words you can rely on to turn you around when you find you've inadvertently wandered down a dark path.

We don't do that so much around here. But there is one piece of the Gospels, the stories of Jesus' life, that I often think of as *my story*. It's the story of the rich young ruler, that we read this morning from the Gospel of Mark. After reading and hearing it many times before, I heard it again, differently, about twelve years ago. That was a really hard moment in my life. My marriage was in serious trouble; I was so burned out and unexplainably unhappy that I was thinking about leaving ministry permanently. I went to a monastery for eight days of mostly silence, to try to clear my mind, somehow get my life back on track. While I was there, a spiritual director handed me this story and asked me what it might be saying to me, now.

I saw in that story someone like me, someone whose life had gone pretty well most of the time. His name in the Gospel, after all, is 'rich young ruler'. What does that convey, if not success? He finds Jesus and he kneels in front of him. He knows how to get the attention of a wise man: he displays appropriate deference. But I notice that he also knew how to work his way through the crowd to get to that first-in-line spot. He asks Jesus a question in language meant to convey very little personal information; he knows he's in a public place. 'Good Teacher, what must I do to obtain eternal life?' Which would have meant to Jesus, and to him, a 'good life'. In their Jewish context there was no expectation, or worry, about what happens after you die.

Jesus knows there is something more buried in the question. So he draws the young man further into conversation. 'You know the conventional wisdom as well as I do,' Jesus says. *Don't commit murder. Don't commit adultery. Don't steal. Don't lie. Honor your father and mother.* He might have added, to you or me, 'Work hard, pay your taxes, buy a house, send your children to college.'

'I've done all those things,' the young man says. 'All my life.' The unspoken next sentence is: 'It's not enough. I've tried so hard to be good. And somehow, it still feels like I'm missing something.'

Jesus 'looked at him carefully and loved him,' Mark says. Which means, I think, that no matter how discreet this rich young ruler was trying to be, how thoroughly he was trying to hide his disappointment in his life, Jesus saw right through him. Understood what he could not say out loud. And felt love—compassion—for the earnestness underneath this young man's self-sufficient demeanor, his lostness.

'Something is holding you apart from the good life you long for,' Jesus says to him. 'Let me help you see what it is. What if you loosened your grip on your possessions, your money, the things that count as richness? What if you traded all those things in for a life like mine?'

We're not told how many beats of silence there were after Jesus finished speaking. I imagine more than a few. This was not what his conversation partner had expected to hear. 'The man was dismayed,' Mark tells us. He turned and walked away, saddened by Jesus' answer, or maybe saddened by something that rose from inside of him into consciousness. Because he had many possessions. Because letting them go sounded like giving up too much.

There are very few stories in the Gospels about people turning away from Jesus, people rejecting directly. This person—someone Jesus looked at with eyes full of love—walked away. Not because he was angry or hateful or unbelieving. Because there was something he loved more; needed more, he thought, than what Jesus was offering.

That rich young ruler didn't *love money* any more than you or I do. The reason he couldn't sell everything and give his money to the poor was the very reason Jesus *asks* him to do it. He'd gotten locked in a room whose walls were made out of his possessions, the things he had mastered, his identity as a person of wealth. Without the name 'rich young ruler', he'd have no idea who he was.

I want to contrast this story with the one Mark tells just a few verses later. It's the story of Bartimaeus. Notice that this character has a name. The earlier one, the rich young ruler, was identified only by his socio-economic status. Bartimaeus is blind, which makes him not only disabled, but economically un-useful to his family and his society. Every day Bartimaeus does the only thing he can do to contribute to his family's income; he sits just outside the town's gates and begs for a little bit of the money travelers bring with them for shopping in Jericho.

His whole success as a beggar depends on him sitting quietly, inoffensively, by the side of the road. Panhandler etiquette commands you *never* obstruct anyone's path. You don't demand attention. You never forget you are a supplicant. But when someone whispers to Bartimaeus that Jesus, the healer, is about to walk by, Bartimaeus goes nuts. He *shouts* at Jesus. Acts totally out of character, risks his begging license for Jesus' eye contact. 'Jesus, son of King David!' he shouts. 'I need something. I am not OK. Have mercy on me.'

There are so many things to notice about this story. At the end of it Jesus heals Bartimaeus, of course. But even before that miracle happens, Mark tells us one critical detail: as soon as Jesus stops and looks at him, Bartimaeus throws aside his coat, jumps up and walks straight to Jesus.

*Throws away his coat.* That coat is probably the only reliable possession Bartimaeus had. It would have been not only the thing he relied on for warmth in the winter, but his rug for sitting on, his tablecloth, his towel. He carries it with him everywhere. As soon as he throws it aside, most likely, it will be grabbed and stolen by someone else. And Bartimaeus doesn't care. Jesus doesn't even have to ask him to leave that coat behind. Blind Bartimaeus sees in Jesus something—someone—that can make him whole. Nothing he's held onto before counts more. Both these stories are about our willingness to let go of what we cling to for our security; what gives us our identity, our place in the world. Like the rich young ruler, there's a lot I really don't want to trade in. For me, it's not my possessions I'm so unwilling to give up; it's the all the other stuff I depend on to tell me who I am. My job, my title, my reputation. Who will I be if I am not *this*?

I don't think God often asks us to make that kind of wholesale life swap. But the Jesus stories suggest to us that we hold our lives more lightly. The things that have seemed to us like our best and most necessary assets, the things that make us *feel* valuable—these are also the things that hold us in place when something new and life-giving might be trying to catch our attention. Our clenched fists around the life we have now are often the very thing that keeps us from being *resurrected* into new life.

Resurrection—new life that comes after something has died—is a central part of the Christian story. But you know, resurrection isn't only about what happens to us after we stop breathing. Easter Sunday sermons have probably sold its meaning short. The story of Jesus' rising on Easter was never supposed to be about a cosmic someday reward for good living. The Easter story was meant to reveal to us a pattern that gets repeated every day: life and death and new life. Easter *happens*, over and over again, while we are alive and after we die both.

Every time you surrender a piece of what you are sure you own, what you think you must have—the power you've earned by your hard work, your claim to the respect that should come with your position, the disappointment you deserve to feel in other people, your right to maintain your most charming bad habit—it's like a small death. You give up something—power or control or self-image—that has given you your identity, your place in the order of things. Most of us don't give those things up easily. For the rich young ruler, his possessions were the symbol of that. For Bartimaeus, his coat.

But when we can do it—let go of what we thought we *had* to hold onto to be ourselves—a universal pattern kicks in. Something new is born, every time.

The Christian story says every time we trust the dying of something inside of us, we'll discover that there was a larger self underneath it. Something new comes alive that could not rise to the surface until we made space for it. You decide to stop pushing yourself to the front of the line and something wonderful happens at the back. You let go of your self-righteous anger and a connection grows in the place of your compromised principle. You surrender your need to control the people you love and somehow, magically, they become lovable on their own.

Every decision to let go of what you have been, what you thought you could not live without, every time you let go of something smaller, you make room for something bigger to happen. It's a pattern, a truth. But every time, you have a choice—to let something familiar die, so that something new can come to life.

This is what resurrection means. It wasn't just for someone named Jesus. It's for all of us. It isn't just for someday, after we die. It's for now.