

## RESTORING A RELIC

[Written in oral form]

Acts 9:36-43; Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 23  
Easter 4, Year C

May 12, 2019  
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In the liturgical calendar, today is called "Good Shepherd Sunday", and includes Psalm 23 as one of the passages.

I just thought you'd like to know that.

I bet that no one thinks this strange.....because "Shepherd" is part of our church nomenclature. I am sure we all have an idea of what the Good Shepherd means, and the notion is very comforting.

However, when was the last time you saw a human shepherd?

Yet, in our Christian religion, shepherd is a familiar concept.

I wonder what those outside of the church domain would think about our references to a sheep herder?

We take this ancient reference for granted, and value it.

Interesting, and there are many other images, symbols and layers in our religion. Most are lifted from the Bible, but many others were inserted over the years, including the venerated cross symbol [ ] and Dante's version of hell.

Religions can get weird if they are not regularly inspected.

I hope to peel away some layers in this sermon in the pursuit of garnering a clearer image.

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Speaking of restoration, how many of you have seen the murals in the Sistine Chapel? [ ]

Who saw it before the 1980-1994 restoration? [ ]

Who has seen it since then? [ ]

I saw it in 1971, and thought it quite impressive then. I opted not to see it 3 years ago because of the crowds.

I have seen pictures of the cleaned results, and the colours and details really pop out since all the layers were removed.

As you know, the ceiling and the last Judgement wall are Frescos.

Fresco means "fresh" in Italian. It's a type of mural painting done by adding water soluble paint to the wet plaster. This technique causes the painting to be in the wall.

Since 1541, when Michelangelo completed the murals, they acquired many layers of grime from smoke, candle wax and worst of all, auto exhaust. All that filth dulled the images.

The restoration removed, layer by layer, using solvents and distilled water, Every single layer, ....Every single layer.

They cleaned it right down to the plaster, and the results rendered stunningly bright colours in the fresco.

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With that in mind, let's process the passages.

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The story in Acts 9 is about the restoration of Tabitha.  
Tabitha's Greek friends knew her as Dorcas. We could call her "Gazelle", but we won't. Her name means gazelle. I'll use the Aramaic Tabitha.  
Tabitha was a believer who became ill and died.  
When Peter arrived, she was very dead. She had received the customary burial preparations. Even though she was cold, stiff dead, Peter was able to bring Tabitha back to life.  
It was a Jesus-like achievement that was told far and wide.  
It demonstrated to the early church that Christ was alive and still ministering through the apostles.  
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Even so, this event can prompt many troubling questions that can make us uncomfortable.  
Such as, "Was this just a N.T. thing, and not possible today?"  
And, if so, then why Not?  
Do we believe that such a miracle could happen today?  
Would we petition a minister to a funeral home to bring back a dead person?  
Oh gosh,.....I hope no one asks me.  
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Some of us are thinking, "Oh, but supernatural miracles do happen. I heard about ....such and such..., and so on.

Perhaps, but radical miracles are NOT very frequent, and that sure doesn't seem fair. OR, is it a matter of having enough faith, and HOW much faith is enough?

And, is faith a currency that can be earned, stored and cashed in for God's blessings? And, why would God demand premium prices from those who are hurting the most?

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We may know better, Yet our **desperate** prayers may include promises to God.....in order to get a desired result / a super-miracle.  
Those promises are offers of payment to God, and that is bad theology.  
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Bad theology forms answers that do Not exist.

On the other hand, I have heard it said, "Oh well, It's God's will."  
"It's God's will that....*whatever*... happened as it did."  
That is an excuse / a dismissal that suggests God is controlling everything.  
It is very problematic to think that God is controlling everything.  
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What if the stories of Acts have a purpose other than requiring literal belief from us? What if our categories about *real, fact and fiction* simply do not fit the world of the writer?  
What if the Acts stories mean to show us that in the new age of the resurrection, God breaks in to our reality in unexpected and surprising ways? Maybe there are just stories for hope, and a prod to look deeper into the spiritual realm?  
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Keeping that perspective / insight may help us better grasp the Revelation text.

In this pericope, John's vision, full of soaring metaphors, describes a scene in heaven.

A multitude is gathered before God; a multitude representing every nation, every language and every sub group,..... well,... except refugees and illegal immigrants.

Actually, it states all groups of people are represented, and they were all equal in status. They were all together, and they were all dressed the same way. They all sang together, "Victory belongs to our God." [Victory is better translation than salvation -- G.B Caird "The Revelation of St. John the Divine."]

Interesting? Does this mean the extra pious and affluent won't get front row, box seats?  
Do church ministers get at least some gold thread in their white rob?

All together.... No rank and privilege, and no line up. ???

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Well, ... of course Not. Line-ups are linear thinking.

When Jesus said the first will be last, and the last first, he was likely chuckling to himself.... because he knew there was Not going to be any lines. Imagine a sphere [ ].

We are all together! We are in this together.

Revelation even says that. We are all together.

The first is the last and vice versa.

How could we think otherwise?

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The book of Revelation is fiction, with lots of fanciful imagery and metaphors. It's a wonderful, fascinating book, ....yet perplexing and even dangerous if taken literally.

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I trust we all know we can bring our minds / our higher levels of thinking to the Bible.

Consider, from the text, the reference to a throne and palm branches.

Really? A real throne? Are there palm trees in heaven?

I have no idea, except both are powerful symbols used to get a message across.

Revelation may be fiction, but it still can possess lots of truth.

Truth endures when tested, and I think it can be felt deep down in our bones. Part of the truth in Revelation is the promise of comfort that brings hope.

I love the message in the last three verses of the Revelation text:

There will be shelter; no more hunger,.... for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and that shepherd will guide them to springs of water of life, and.... and...

God WILL WIPE AWAY EVERY TEAR from their eyes.

God will wipe away every tear.

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In our Christian religion, we understand the shepherd as one who protects and comforts. Our perception of the shepherd is much like loving parents who nurture, protect, comfort and love their children.

Loving parents will do whatever they can to help and protect their children, but.....that cannot do everything. They cannot guarantee safety and a painless life, and that is the truth.

Bad things happen,.....they just happen. There is uncertainty, and there are risks and hazards in life,.....and that unnerves most of us.

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The Acts and Revelation were written to bring comfort and hope to people struggling, afraid and hurting.

We can embrace the delightful stories and images, knowing they are trying to reflect the compassionate nature of God.

We can let go of the literal interpretations. We can remove the distortions / some of the layers from 2,000 years of church answers.

BUT, we must not lose the essence.

In our pursuit of accuracy, we can scrub the Bible down to mere blank pages.

It is good to ask the Bible questions, but it must be done with care and reverence.

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Many critics argue that the restoration of the Sistine Chapel murals went too far. All the layers were removed down to the plaster.

The cleaning rendered the images bright in colour ....and sterile.

Many of the painted figures no longer had eyes--no iris and no pupil.

Many experts assert that Michelangelo painted the eyes on after the plaster had dried, on top of the plaster. That layer was removed.

In addition, keep in mind that Michelangelo was more a sculptor than a painter. It was a common practice then to add shadowing to make the images appear more three dimensional. That was done by adding a layer made of ash and water for shadows. It is thought that Michelangelo did that, but that layer was washed off too.

The result of the thorough purging is bright colourful images that are missing the character they once had.

Notice I called it a purge and not a restoration.

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Let us be careful when we seek to remove elements from the Bible.

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For example:

In our dining room is the table that Leslie's parents had for years.

It is marred and stained. It doesn't not look brand new, and that's okay. It's okay because we know how those blemishes got there.

Life and religion are full of blemishes and gray areas.

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The image of the Good Shepherd is worth keeping, if you want to.

We know where it came from, and we know what it means.

I like angels, so I'm holding on to them, too.

I don't think keeping them is harmful.

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Speaking of harm:

A little over a year ago, on Palm Sunday evening, as most of you know. I was in the hospital.

My digestive system, periodically, takes a day or so off. It just stops working. The symptoms are like an intestinal blockage--extremely painful. But, there is no blockage, and specialists are still trying to figure it out.

This episode was different than the previous 4 or 5.

After a brief time in the regular ER, I was moved to a lovely area with lots of doctors and nurses. It was the cardiac intensive care unit.

For some reason, maybe from the pain, my heart went into arterial fibrillation. My heart was beating from 200 to 225 beats a minute.

The drugs meant to solve that also lowered my blood pressure, as do pain medication. Unfortunately, I received less pain medication.

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The concept of time disappears with lots of pain and a racing heart.

12 hours went by, and my heart was still in fibrillation.

A doctor came to us, Leslie was next to me, and he said, "We need to try another type of drug to deal with your heart because your blood pressure is too low." He said that I had to take it orally, and it would take effect in 15-20 minutes."

I turned to Leslie and said, "You've been here 12 hours without food, why don't you go get something to eat."

The doctor sternly responded, "NOW is NOT a good time to leave."

He added that a heart cannot sustain beating that fast for so long.

Hearing that was a bit troubling.

So, I thought maybe reciting Psalm 23 would bring comfort and calm.

However, there was one big problem.

Pardon the pun, but for the life of me, I could NOT remember it.

I was personally embarrassed because I thought every minister should at least be able to quote Psalm 23.

So, I did my best splicing together what I could recall, and said it silently to myself. The insert is what I wrote down later, and I think it's close to what I said.

I will read it:

Gracious God, creator of all things, is my protector and advocate.

I am content; I shall not want.

God makes me, insists that I rest in green nourishing places.

God leads me to calm and still waters.

God restores my soul, and leads in a life giving direction that is God's way.

Even though I wander off and walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for there is protection and stability there to comfort me.

You prepare an opportunity for healing and reconciliation before me in the presence of my enemies.

You bless me with your confidence by anointing my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall be with me, and I will dwell in the Lord's peaceful house my whole life long.

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I silently said that a couple times, and then instantly I felt calm and relaxed.

I looked at the monitor, and my heart was beating normally.

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Was it a miracle or did the drug work faster than expected... or did I lose track of time? ??????

Is there magic in my paraphrase? NO, of course not.

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However, God was very present and very active. I sensed that.

I was prompted to recite the essence of Psalm 23. Perhaps, because of its wonderful message and imbedded history.

Moreover, as I was searching for the words to say, I felt that I was in the presence of God / that God was telling me what to recite.

**THAT WAS A MIRACLE!!!!**

Was it a supernatural, off-the-wall miracle? ??????

For me it was.

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And, by the way, I have a very strong heart..... just a wimpy digestive system.

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So, Why me, then, and not everyone all the time?

I do Not have an answer for that?

Yet, I find comfort and hope believing that God is present and active in the world, today.

I find comfort and hope believing that God is love and will, when I don't know,....wipe away every tear.

We can find hope in the Bible, and we can look around and find hope in the beauty of Creation.

I'll take tulips and blossoms over buck a beer any time.

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Love is stronger than greed, fear and lies.

God is active, and we are part of it all. All who believe see God's unfolding kingdom of justice and righteousness.

Even with layers that may cloud our understanding, we can rejoice in the power of the resurrection.

There is hope. My soul cries out with a joyful shout that the God of my heart is great.... the world is about to turn.