

WGUMC July 20, 2014 "On the third day he rose from the dead. He ascended into heaven." Romans 6:1-11

I was running at Santa Teresa County Park, up the switchbacks on the Stile Ranch Trail on Wednesday morning and in the sagebrush next to me I saw the largest wasp I had ever seen. About two inches long, its body was blue-black, not yellow, and its wings were a bright orange. I stopped, stared and ran on.

When I got home, I did some research and discovered that I had seen a kind of spider wasp called a Tarantula Hawk. It's called that because it kills tarantulas. Actually, the female first paralyzes them and lays her egg on them. And when the egg hatches, she digs a hole into the spider's abdomen where her larvae will eat the tarantula from the inside out, while it is still alive.

Now you are as grossed out as I was. Sorry about that. I read on and learned that the sting from this wasp is the second

most painful sting ever measured. And I had been nose to nose with two of these guys!

As I was trying to mentally process the horrors of Mother Nature, it dawned on me that, in many ways, human culture is not much better. There are plenty of people in the world today who feed on death in much the same way.

Consider what is going on in Israel and Gaza. Anyone in a position of power in that part of the world today got into power by exploiting people's fears, by profiting from the violence, by feeding on the never-ending cycle of death. Why can't they make peace there? Because too many powerful people are making a killing. They are human tarantula hawks, because they suck the life and the hope out of the men, women and children who live in that unholy land. Especially the children, who have grown up knowing no time but wartime. For them, death is just a way of life.

I can't think of any place that needs the resurrection more than the Middle East. But even in the West, resurrection has not always gotten the attention it deserves. Roman Catholics have their crucifixes and the Stations of the Cross. Protestants have their hymns: "In the Cross of Christ I Glory"; "Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross"; "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross."

What happens in the West is that we put so much emphasis on the suffering and death of Christ, that we tend to short shrift the resurrection of Christ. We sing about the cross all year long and about the resurrection on Easter Sunday. That Western prejudice was made into a movie: Mel Gibson's *The Passion*. For me, it was pretty hard to watch. The scourging of Jesus seemed to go on for hours. The crucifixion, even longer. I couldn't wait for it to be over. And when we finally got to the resurrection, it lasted about 30 seconds. Now I get that Gibson was trying to make us see how Jesus was literally taking on *all*

the sins and *all* the suffering of humanity. But traumatizing viewers with Roman violence was not what Paul had in mind when he said, in Romans, that we must die with Christ in order to be raised with Christ.

The Sixth Chapter starts off by talking about being baptized into Christ's death. [Rom 6:3] That sounds bizarre until we realize that this is a figure of speech. It means that when we are baptized, we receive the benefit of Christ's death. That is, we are freed from our sin. In baptism, the old self, corrupted by sin, is crucified, and the new self emerges, no longer enslaved by sin. [6:6] So what Paul is saying is that when we are baptized, we are united with him in a death like his so that we can be united with him in a resurrection like his.

[6:5]

What Paul wants is for all of us to be free for life. Let all the death die in you: the old self that serves nothing but the self; the old sins that just keep causing new sickness; the old

fears that are never going to face new realities; the old blindness that sees the violence but keeps silent. You can't let any of this death have dominion over you, if you want to be with Christ.

Resurrection means that whatever bad has happened to you, whatever awful choices you have made, however many horrible people have hurt you, none of it has any power over you. Because he defeated death, because he rose on the third day, you are dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. [6:11]

That's resurrection if you are an Eastern Orthodox Christian. While Christians in the West typically look at the resurrection from the perspective of the cross, Orthodox Christians in the East tend to see the cross through the lens of the resurrection.

And this difference of perspective leads to differences in practice. For example, in the West, we begin the season of Lent with Ash Wednesday. We repent of our sins and receive

the mark of the cross in ashes on our forehead. Then we spend the rest of Lent considering that cross and meditating on the suffering that Jesus did there.

In the East, they don't do Ash Wednesday. Instead, they do Clean Monday. In Greece, they go to confession and then they go fly kites. Honest. And as they are flying their kites, they imagine their sins flying up to God. Then they go home and clean house, so they can start with a clean slate. The focus of Orthodox Lent is not the death of Jesus, but the life that Jesus made possible for us.

Last week, our worship bulletin showed Christ descending into hell and reaching out to rescue Adam and Eve. In the Orthodox Church, that is an icon of Easter. That's how they understand the Resurrection. It's about how Christ has rescued all of the descendants of Adam and Eve by defeating death and setting us free for life. Resurrection is not just what happened to Jesus way back when, but what can happen for us now.

This week, Carol Hay sent me a video about the Rocky Mountain Annual Conference (UMC) that supports a program that enlists prison inmates to train puppies who go on to be companion dogs for veterans who are suffering from PTSD. These dogs are keeping soldiers from killing themselves. That is Resurrection.

This afternoon, we will go out to the ballpark and raise money for Imagine No Malaria. The United Methodist Church has raised over \$62 million to eradicate that disease. With the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Global Fund, we have cut the death rate in Africa by half since the year 2000. That is Resurrection.

But it comes much closer to home than that. I know someone who reminds me a little of Job. Everything bad has happened to her. But her friends didn't forget about her. In fact, the friends took up a little collection. They gave it to the We Care Fund. I had the privilege of passing it on. This week, I

handed out a real check that, believe me, will make a real difference. That is Resurrection: when we come together to be united with him in a death like his, if that's what it takes to be united with him in a life like his.

It's all acted out in the Orthodox liturgy from late on Good Friday to early on Easter Sunday. So I want you to look at the slides and imagine yourself in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. It's just before midnight on Holy Saturday. You were here for Vespers on Good Friday. At that service, you had processed around the outside of the church with the *epitaphios*, also called "the winding sheet." The priest carried it high above his head. It was to remind you of the cloth used to wrap the body of Jesus when he was hastily laid in the tomb. After circling the church three times, you went back into the sanctuary, and as you did so, you passed under the *epitaphios* and symbolically into the death of Jesus.

Less than twenty-four hours later, you are back here in this holy space. All lights have been extinguished, and you stand still in the darkness. At the stroke of midnight, the priest brings a candle from the altar and passes the light until thousands of little lights make one big light that fills the entire sanctuary. Then the priest leads another procession out into the night. You are singing, and again you circle the church three times. At last, you return to the closed front doors and wait for the words: "Christ is Risen!" Then you sing a song about Christ trampling down death by death and the doors swing open. And just as you had passed through these same doors into Christ's death, now you pass through them into his glorious life.

That's Orthodox Easter. Now what the Orthodox do in liturgy, we can all do in life. Through baptism, we faithfully enter into Christ's death, so that we can triumphantly enter into his life. Right now! We don't have to wait for anything to

happen because Christ is Risen! And we don't need to be afraid of anything, not even tarantula hawks, because we know that: "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?...thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." [I Corinthians 15:54b-55, 57]

Apostles' Creed