

Sunday, April 18 2021
Rev. Dr. Rodney Kennedy
“Taking Resurrection Seriously-
American Christians Have a thinking Problem
Luke 24:36-48

American Christians have a thinking problem. The word is epistemology. It means how we think and what we know and what we consider true. It speaks to the crisis in our own nation's life: People can't stand to be told they don't have as much epistemic right as anyone else. We are a people clamoring for our "rights" and our "opinions". Opinions have moved from the outhouse to the penthouse. Everybody's got opinions. "My opinions are just as good as yours," we shout. But that is not the case. If I have a lung infection, the opinion of my plumber doesn't count, but my pulmonologist makes the call. Opinions are rhetorical bullies and they have routed facts, truth, expert advice, science, political theory, and every other discipline. Americans may be the most opinionated people in the world.

As early as the 1920's scientists connected smoking to lung cancer. How many decades did it take to convince Americans that smoking is bad for you? In 1950 50% of Americans smoked; today 14% - that over 37,000,000. We are not exactly on a crusade to embrace scientific truth are we? Remember the fierce debates about seat belts? I have a cousin who refuses to wear a seat belt because he says he would be trapped in a burning car if he had a wreck. Americans can be stubborn about our thinking.

We are also a people at war with "truth" itself. The word "truthiness" has invaded our national consciousness. "Alternative truth" has become an actual possibility. Now, we have added a layer of arrogance from people who are unwilling to be bound by anything, not even the truth itself. We have people claiming they know more about any subject than the trained experts. "I disagree with these experts" has become the all-American slogan. "Who are these scientists to tell me what to do?" Cut and slice it

anyway you wish, but we have a thinking problem, an epistemic crisis.

TWO CLAIMS

I am a member of the class known as an expert: theologian, preacher, philosopher, biblical student. My work is routinely criticized by non-specialists. I accept this as part of the calling. Over sixty-five years of study and reading, I have acquired certain skills for which I don't apologize. I am not bashful about expressing what I have come to know about the Bible, and I am not intimidated when people say they disagree, even when those people are going on their "gut" or their "common sense" or the "way Americans think about the Bible." I would never suggest that people don't have a right to their opinions; but don't expect them to have epistemic power. All opinions are not valid, but all opinions are welcome.

I have two theological, biblical claims for us to consider. I make these claims convinced they are true and that they have the epistemic power to transform how we think. Claim one: The resurrection and the reading of the Bible are connected to one another. New Testament scholar Richard B. Hays says, "We interpret Scripture rightly only when we read it in the light of the resurrection."

My second claim is that the resurrection is not just a belief, it is a way of life. Believing in the resurrection is not sufficient to bring about the kingdom of God on earth. New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright says: "The post-pandemic world needs the real Easter message: the message of a new creation which began when Jesus was raised from the dead."

THE STORY OF RESURRECTION

"While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'" They were talking about the two disciples encountering Jesus on the road to

Emmaus, talking about that Bible study led by Jesus, talking about knowing Jesus in the breaking of the bread. How often does the church get stuck right at this point? Talking without thinking – another epistemological problem. I am tempted to believe the church invented the filibuster. We can talk anything to death. I was once charged with the task of helping a church develop a long-range planning document. The first meeting lasted 3 hours and people talked and talked and talked about the problems they were facing. In the second meeting, the problems were again front and center. I finally interrupted to say, “Enough with the problems. The only conversation now will be generated by persons with solutions.”

“They were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost.” Liberal visions of God have turned God into a wimp. No one shows up at church to work out salvation with fear and trembling. We saunter in as if we own the place and we proceed to critique the music and the sermon and we go to lunch. The word from God? Not so much? A sense of deep reverence and even a bit of anxiety? Not likely. “Startled and terrified” doesn’t describe us – not at church. This is exactly what happens when Jesus shows up.

But in our world, we are more concerned about our own feelings of precarity and pain. There are grounds for saying that we have become a nation of fear – a people scared out of our minds. Of all things, Jesus asks, “Why are you scared? Why do all these doubts flare up in your hearts and minds?” We want to say, “Lord, you must not be from around these parts. There are plenty of reasons to be afraid and even more reasons to have doubts. Have you seen the news? Bombarded by tales of violence, we double check to see if the doors are locked, we grip our coffee cups with white-knuckled fright (if we are white), and we hesitate to go to Wal Mart because the next mass killer may be stalking our neighborhood now. Yet you say to us, “Why are you frightened?”

Startled and terrified? You betcha. It's hard to think clearly when frightened.

"And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet." Of all things, the answer of Jesus to fear and doubt was to show them the signs of the cross. He bore them in his body, even his resurrected body. "A ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." Jesus' answer to fear and doubt: a resurrected, bodily, fleshly, material response. This is our story.

"While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering," Some days I would gladly settle for getting people to the point of almost believing. These are my people – the unbelievers who are wondering if the resurrection might, just might be true. These are the people still wondering if they need a religious experience, wondering if there might be more to life.

Jesus, wanting to make it clear that faith is about the material, the physical, flesh and blood of humanity, said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence." People want to debate resurrection and Jesus says, "Fish and chips!" "I'm hungry." This is as human as it gets, and we recognize this human need. Nothing energized my mother like someone who said, "I'm hungry." She would spring into action and whip up a five-course meal quicker than you could say, "I'm fixing to go." She knew, somehow, that hunger is a primal human need, and that satisfying hunger is a virtue.

Contrapuntal: That's the story. Now what difference does it make?

RESURRECTION AND READING SCRIPTURE

Then he "opened their minds to understand the scriptures." Resurrection is about understanding the scriptures. I believe the resurrection because I believe the Scripture.

Let me try to help just a bit more. From John: "After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken." Then there are the Sadducees, who rejected the resurrection, who, according to Jesus know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. And there's the disciples on the Road to Emmaus: "Weren't our hearts burning within us as he was speaking to us and opening to us the scriptures." And our text: "Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures."

Now, do we understand? Reading the Bible in the light of the resurrection opens both the text and the reader, to new, previously unimagined, possibilities. I believe the resurrection is real because I believe the Scriptures tell the true story and I take the Scriptures seriously. This crucial step opens the way to a radical reading of resurrection power.

RESURRECTION IS A NEW EPISTEMIC REALITY

I cannot preach a resurrection that is only about believing, or a spiritualized Jesus. Resurrection is our speech act. Resurrection requires performance. If I preach resurrection that has nothing to do with economics, with changing the entire social fabric of the world, then I am a clanging cymbal. We can't merely believe in resurrection; we have to be resurrected people. Don't drag your list of beliefs that look like they have been kept in a bottom desk drawer forever in here. Scripture has a word for such lists – filthy rags.

Life doesn't get any more precarious, bodily, fleshly, material than the millions suffering in poverty. What does resurrection have to do with poverty? Let me show you. The church born on the day of Pentecost knew that resurrection meant a new economy. In Acts 4, there's no separating "all things in common" from "testimony to the resurrection of Jesus." Scripture and resurrection go together; eliminating human need and resurrection go together. Poverty and the places where poverty

haunts human life and shortens human life is a dead zone. Resurrection invades dead zones and makes them live again. Don't tell me that poverty is an issue we can't solve. Don't try using Jesus' words about the poor always being with us as an excuse for poverty. God has given us all the time in the world to get rid of poverty. We either practice resurrection or we don't.

Jesus gives us everything we need to be resurrection people. Jesus gives us the "bread and wine". This is where we learn to let go of our fear that there will not be enough for everyone if we share. The more the body and blood of Christ is shared, the more there is to be shared. This is where we learn to stop seeing the world as a place of scarcity and want.

I'm asking you to consider rethinking your usual way of thinking. Believe in the resurrection by all means. I am proud to join you in that essential Christian belief. More than that, think of resurrection as the raising from the dead all that is worn out, inferior, debilitating, and hurtful. Become a resurrection person by bringing into being resurrection economics. That will not only be an epistemic revolution; it will be a transforming power unleashed on the status quo. It's up to you and me. Let's do it!