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“What You See is Not All You Get”

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What You See is Not All You Get

Jeremiah 31:1-6; Psalm 118; Matthew 28:1-10
Easter Day A

Sermon by Sharon Rhodes-Wickett
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It's been quite a few years since film critic Roger Ebert disappeared from our television screens. He and his nemesis, and good friend, Gene Siskel (and later Roeper) made their trademark evaluations popular: Thumbs up or Thumbs down.

In 2002 Ebert had surgery to remove a cancerous thyroid, and in 2006 more surgery to remove his salivary glands, and as the cancer continued to spread, he had more and more surgeries, removing more parts from his lower face. The cancer moved into his jawbone and bit by bit he lost it too. They removed bone from his legs and his back and shoulders to try to rebuild his jawbone, but time and again, it fell apart.

Last month he gave an interview where he reflected on his life, through the voices of his wife and close friends, as well as a computer voice.

He said there wasn't a particular day when someone finally told him that he would never eat or speak again. He said it just gradually became obvious.

He said in order to eat or speak there has to be an air-tight system in place to capture air, and since his jaw was never able to be re-built, his perfectly good working parts, such as his larynx and tongue were rendered powerless.

This caused him to wonder about our human identity. He said, "The act of speaking, or not speaking, is tied so indelibly to one's identity as to force the birth of a new person when it is taken away. What value do you place on the sound of our own voice? How does it affect who you are as a person?"

He said he feels a disconnect with a computer voice that bears no resemblance to him and he feels it creates separation or distance. That causes him to feel disconnected from the human mainstream.

His appearance is somewhat shocking since his misshapen jaw hangs down and it has little relationship to the top part of his face.

He said, "People look at you like you have lost your marbles. People talk loudly and slowly to me, they assume I'm deaf. They don't want to make eye contact. It is human nature to look away from illness. People don't enjoy a reminder of our own fragile mortality. But my ability to think and write is not affected. Writing on the internet is a life-saver for me. On the web my real voice finds expression."

He has made friends with other disabled people through the internet and discusses the many gifts they bring to the human community.

He said they might all agree that, "What you see is not all you get!"¹ When I heard that, I thought to myself: 'that is an Easter message if I ever heard one': "What you see is not all you get!"

I think Jesus might have affirmed such a notion: that there is so much more beyond what any of us can see.

There is mystery in creation;
there is mystery in life;
there is mystery in love;

there is mystery in on-going birthing of life
that defies empirical observation.

Ebert was referring to disfigurement and others' reactions and he therefore is staking a claim that there is more to him, and others, than what you actually see. Ebert is a self-avowed practicing atheist and he might not appreciate my use of his reflections for an Easter sermon. I respect that, AND I know God to have a goofy sense of humor and I like that too!

Matthew's rendition of the empty tomb story highlights the idea that what you see is not all you get. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to the tomb as soon as the Sabbath was over; we presume to prepare the body, since they didn't have time before the Sabbath. What they expected to see was not what they found at all.

They got much more than what they could see or could imagine. Not only was Jesus' body not there, but the angel told them Jesus was on his way to Galilee. They encountered the living Christ on their way, who asked them to gather more disciples and come to Galilee.

It has always been the case that there is more than what meets the eye. Jesus saw "the more" in people he met, and he reached out and connected with what others did not see.

The reading from Jeremiah is a beautiful passage, but it comes as the result of trusting empire more than God.

The united kingdom of Israel, comprising the "twelve tribes" named after Jacob's sons, fell apart at the end of the 8th century b.c.e., due to rivalry between a confederation of ten tribes in the north and two in the south and their conflicting alliances with empires in the region.

The Assyrians, allied with the kingdom of Judah in the south, annexed portions of the northern kingdom of Israel/Samaria. They eventually conquered the whole of the northern kingdom and deported the people to Assyria.

The southern kingdom of Judah had broken relationship with God when it formed alliances with the Assyrian Empire, which collapsed at the end of the 7th century b.c.e. When early in the 6th century, Judah (the south) fell to the Neo-Babylonian Empire, Jeremiah and other ancient prophets interpreted its destruction and the Babylonian exile as divine judgment.

Jeremiah nevertheless proclaimed God's faithfulness to the covenant. Following earlier scathing words of judgment against Judah, the 29 chapters leading up to today's text, Jeremiah's words in 31.1-6 express a strong note of hope as Judah returned from the Babylonian exile. It was Jeremiah's hope that the south and north would unite and be one family.

In discussing Jeremiah, scholar Jorge Pixley points out that, "If we are to take the book of Jeremiah as Holy Scripture, the Word of God, we must read it not just as a book about Judah and Babylon in the sixth century b.c.e., but as a book about empires in general. Today, the book speaks to Jewish people and Christian churches in their complex relation with today's empire, the United States." ⁱⁱ

He goes on to point out that many church members support U.S. "military ventures" out of a sense of patriotism, and that Israel occupies a significant place in U.S. national/imperial interests in the Middle East. Jeremiah 30-33 envisions a time when empires will "no longer exist," or be reduced to "ordinary" states, and when "scattered people of God will be again gathered as one in the promised land...".

In short, Jeremiah speaks a word of warning to today's empires. He also speaks a word of hope.

Easter is God's "Yes!" to Jesus' attempt to reconcile Jeremiah's people—Galileans, Samaritans, and Judeans, still separated by ancient hostilities. The message of Easter has also contributed to hostilities that separate Christians from Jews and Muslims—say nothing of the scandal of hostilities separating Christians from Christians! If only Easter would be a time for Christians to dance Jeremiah's "dance of merry-makers" with Jews and Muslims.

At least on Easter Sunday, Christians should dance in reconciliation with other Christians, just as Jeremiah envisioned dancing in celebration of God's faithfulness to love "*all the families of Israel*" with everlasting love!

Last Sunday was just such a time of the dance of merrymakers! Jews, Muslims and Christians - all gathered at the Claremont Islamic Center for an Interfaith Seder. Over 225 of us shared table fellowship together.

What we saw was not all there was to get! It was a joyful gathering of God's family in one place and we heard speech in Hebrew, Arab, Aramaic and English. Together we shared God's hopes of being one family together, worshipping a God who desires all the families on earth to come together as one.

Empires cannot tolerate God's impartial peace among all nations, so they try to discredit and even execute messengers of God's peace.

The Easter message, however, is that God transforms their executions, as God did for Jesus and all the prophets before him. Death cannot silence God's message of peace for all nations, though empires may try to silence those who preach God's message of peace. Jesus, God's messenger of God's impartial peace, is not dead but lives on in God, and in those whom God calls to be new messengers of peace.

In Mt 28.5, the angel says to the women, "...I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified." The phrase "*who was crucified*" is a perfect tense in Greek. This verb tense signifies an act or event completed in the past whose effects continue into the future.

That means Jesus' crucifixion was not a temporary event in the past, which God undoes through Jesus' resurrection. The risen Jesus remains the crucified one.

What effects of the crucifixion continue? Are they not the effects of Jesus' execution at the hands of imperial authorities for his faithfulness to God's justice on earth?

The imperial authorities are condemned by Jesus' *faithfulness even to the point of death*, and Jesus' *faithfulness even to the point of death* continues to transform us even now.

Jesus' resurrection, of course, makes no sense apart from his death. If, however, we read Jesus' death as an integral part of his life, instead of as an isolated event of cosmic battle between Jesus and God's wrath, it is possible to read Jesus' resurrection as God's response to Jesus' life of *faithful service* to God's justice on "earth as in heaven."

This faithful service led to resistance from imperial powers and ultimately their execution of Jesus on a cross. God's resurrection of Jesus is God's vindication of the *costly faithfulness* of Jesus' proclamation: "God's life-giving justice rules on earth as in heaven!"ⁱⁱⁱ

In this reading of Jesus' resurrection, the risen Christ's charge to his followers is to continue his engagement with "the powers," even, and especially, powers of *death* in all their forms, such as:

- economic preferential treatment for the rich,
- imperial occupation and domination,
- ecological exploitation, and so on.

Resurrection is constant, insofar as we continue to be the bearers of God's impartial peace. We bear God's imprint.

Resurrection is daily – hourly – moment by moment - whenever what we see is not all there is. We can never be satisfied only with what IS!

Resurrection unfolds and breathes in new life whenever there are acts of love and justice. The door to the tomb is burst open!

With God it is always more – and that MORE leads to new life for all. Like the unseen bulb hidden in the dark earth, life is surging forth into God's light.

See: God is making all things new!

Can you feel it?

ⁱ http://www.ted.com/talks/roger_ebert_remaking_my_voice.html

ⁱⁱ Jorge V. Pixley, *Jeremiah*, Chalice Commentaries for Today [St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004], 95

ⁱⁱⁱ David Lull, www.processandfaith.org