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“Transformations”
A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

3rd Sunday of Easter
April 18, 2010
Acts 9:1–20; Ps. 30; Jn. 21:1–19

*Who would have thought that you would take
this uncredentialed
Galilean rabbi
to become the pivot of newness in the world?
Who would have thought that you—
God of gods and Lord of lords—
would fasten on such small, innocuous agents
whom the world scorns
to turn creation toward your newness? . . .
We ask for freedom and courage to move out from our
nicely arranged patterns of security
into dangerous places of newness where we fear to go.
Cross us by the cross, that we may be Easter marked.*

Walter Brueggemann
Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth, p. 158

I doubt that many of you recognize the name Fred Snodgrass. Barbara Fish may recognize his name because he was a baseball player, and she knows about all things baseball.

Fred Snodgrass made one mistake that the world would not let him forget. He played center field for the New York Giants. In the 1912 World Series, the Giants

were playing against the Boston Red Sox. The teams were tied in the tenth inning of a crucial game when a fly ball fell into Snodgrass's mitt... and he dropped it.

The Red Sox went on to win that game and to win the series, and the error stuck with Snodgrass the rest of his life. Sixty-two years later, his *New York Times* obituary read: "Fred Snodgrass, 86, Dead; Ball Player Muffed 1912 Fly." I Googled Fred Snodgrass, and almost 100 years later, the headline reads: "Fred Snodgrass drops ball and loses World Series."¹

The way we might have remembered Peter the Apostle was: "Simon Peter, Fisherman; Denied His Lord in 33 A.D."

The early Christians never forgot that Peter muffed it. You remember the story of how he denied knowing Jesus three times—then he went out and wept over the biggest failure in his life.

That was where Peter's story might have ended. That is the way it works in the world: you goof up; your mistakes, your muffs, your dropped balls, these stories stay with you; they haunt you. That might have been the way the story ended if the Risen Christ had not shown up. After Jesus's crucifixion, Peter went back to his former occupation, back to the life he knew before Jesus came along. I love the declaration where Peter turned to the others and said, "I'm going fishing. Enough of this discipleship stuff. I'm going back to something I know, something where I won't muff it, something where I'll get it right. Enough of this discipleship stuff." It does not work out too well. They fished all night and caught nothing.

Then just after daybreak, a stranger appeared on the shore and shouted to the weary fishermen, "Put your nets down on the right side!" "Oh, sure," they said, "we're the pros. Who is this guy? But anyway, it won't hurt to try it." They cast their nets on the other side of the boat, and the catch was so big, they had a hard time pulling it out.

¹ James Harnish, "Reflections on the Lectionary," *Christian Century*, April 6, 2010, p. 21.

They brought the catch into the shore, and what followed was a moving scene—breakfast on the beach. The meal resembles the Eucharist: the Risen Lord shared bread and fish to nourish his tired and weary disciples. What followed was a painful, truthful, hopeful encounter as the Risen Christ asked Peter, “Do you love me? Feed my sheep.” Three times. Not a coincidence. But Peter is not only reinstated, he is transformed. His life now has a mission, a purpose: he goes out to serve his Risen Lord, to be one of those who turns the world upside-down in the name of the Risen Christ. God gave him something to do. Transformation always leads to mission.

Bill Muehl, who taught preaching at Yale, said you know forgiveness and reconciliation has happened not just when the right words are said, not just when you say, “I’m sorry, I forgive you.” You know forgiveness has taken place when there is a common task to do, and you join together in doing what you are supposed to be doing. A couple works hard to get over a tough time in their lives. They say the right words about forgiving each other, but they know they are reinstated, reunited, rejoined, transformed when one of them says, “Hey, grab that dishrag and come help me do these dishes”, or “Take that rag and go upstairs and get the ring from around the tub.” Transformation leads to mission.

The church can’t forget Peter’s story because we see ourselves in it. No matter how inspiring our experience with Christ has been, no matter how well nurtured and brought up we are in the faith, we end up denying him. We are tempted to say, “It was good while it lasted, but I might as well go back to fishing. This is over! Done! I’m out of here.”

But then the Risen Christ shows up when and where we least expect him. As they say in the African-American church, “Can I get a witness?” Can I get a witness from anybody here, that when your life seems at a dead end, when you seemed to have muffed it, to have dropped the fly ball, you got a second chance, somebody showed up?

Saul’s obituary would have read: “Saul of Tarsus, Dead; Persecuted Followers of Jesus Christ.” But that was not what it reads. Saul became Paul, building churches,

giving us the theology that is the foundation of the church. You know what happened to him. He was transformed into one who spread the Gospel.

In a world without the Risen Christ, you know what to expect. When you fall down, they will always remember the way you landed. In a world *with* the Risen Christ, you are supposed to find transformation, new life, new hope, a new beginning.

It happens, but I am afraid too often, we in the church, and we in our culture don't believe it can happen.

At one stage in my ministry, I volunteered for a prison ministry. I visited prisoners in a large federal penitentiary in Atlanta, Georgia. I became friends with one man who had done a number of years for a crime that he had committed. In the process, he'd changed his life: he had been involved in Bible study; he had worked to better educate himself. I remember going in and seeing him as he was preparing to leave the prison. I said, "I'll bet you're excited; you're getting ready to get out. You've been in here for fifteen years. It's going to be good to be free." He said, "Joe, I'm scared to death." I asked, "Why are you so scared?" He said, "How do you think they're going to treat me out there? Would you like for me to move in next door to you: a convicted felon, done fifteen years in a federal penitentiary. I know I've changed, but I'm afraid others won't see it that way."

It is hard to believe this new thing that God does in the lives of others and that God can do in your lives and mine. That is why we have to be witnesses. That is why we have to bear witness what happened to Peter and to Paul, and to what happens to people's lives all the time.

The story of the Resurrection is the story of God's power let loose in the world, a power that has the ability to transform us, to make us into new creations. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:7). That is the tradition to which we're introducing Booker Lawson today: to a tradition that believes that lives can be remade, that newness can happen, that God can break down walls and bring people together.

Can I get a witness?

In the First Presbyterian Church in Tallahassee, Florida, where I served a number of years ago, there was an older woman named Esther Terrell. She was in her late 80s when I met her. Her husband was Justice Glenn Terrell, Sr., Chief Justice of the Florida Supreme Court. He was elected five times to that position, more than anybody else has ever been elected to head the Supreme Court. He taught a Sunday school class every Sunday. He insisted that if you were in his Sunday school class, you would go with him on Sunday afternoons to visit the prisoners in the federal prison. He was a great man.

When he died, Esther Terrell, his widow, was devastated. She told me, “Joe, there were days when I could not get out of bed. I was so down. I didn’t know what to do with my life. One day, I got a call from the Red Cross, saying they needed my blood type. Would I come and give blood? Well, I couldn’t refuse. I got up and went to the Red Cross. The person who checked me in was a stranger. But in the process of talking to me, she said, ‘You know, you’re just the kind of person we need here at the Red Cross. I can see it when you smile. You have a pretty smile, and you know how to greet people. Giving blood is sometimes frightening for people. Would you consider coming and being a volunteer here at the blood center?’” Esther Terrell, in her 90s, still volunteering every day in the Red Cross, said to me, “Joe, that stranger changed my life. I think it was a call from God.” Let me tell you: it not only transformed her life, but the tales of her impact on the lives of people she met are legendary, and they are still being told today in Tallahassee, Florida.

Members of the church, we need to listen to these witnesses to the resurrection, about Peter and Paul and Esther Terrell. They remind us of our identity as baptized people who have died with Christ and the new life we have through Christ’s transforming presence. When you drop the ball, when you’re down, when the world seems too much for you to handle, remember the Risen Lord is still at work. The transforming power of God’s love is set loose in the world from which nothing can separate us. That is what Paul told us: nothing in all creation, and he knew the power of that love. This transforming love is deeper and stronger than our failure to live up to it. It’s deeper and stronger than anything else in the world. And that’s

what we need to teach Booker, all the children of this church, and ourselves. When you drop the ball, when you fall down, when you muff it, the Risen Christ has the power and the will to transform you.

Please know that whatever has happened or is happening in your life, whatever you are dealing with, whatever seems frightening, impossible to overcome, please know that a new world has dawned. New creations are being made every day because Christ is alive.

Can I get a witness?

Amen.