

The Promise
[Genesis 9:12-17](#)
[John 20:1-18](#)

Easter Sunday

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About three weeks ago I was driving to church in the morning. It was a cloudy day. Expecting rain, I had an umbrella in the car. I drove from Livermore and stopped on Stanley Boulevard to make a right turn onto Valley. It was about 8:45. There before me in the sky was an arc of a rainbow, partially hidden by a cloud, but bright and promising. It made me think of the scriptures I had chosen for Lent, about creation and Noah's flood. You know, we have been having rain, like California *never* gets. Yet the rainbow was a surprise—rainbows always are—and I contemplated the meaning of the rainbow as I drove along Valley Avenue. Then at the light at Santa Rita—it's always red—I stopped and looked up. In front of me was the complete rainbow, now perfect from horizon to horizon, with each color discernable and vivid. I took a picture on my cell phone before the light turned green.

About this time, a year ago, I needed a rainbow. You might remember last Easter Sunday I preached about family friends whose newborn baby was flown by emergency helicopter from Stanford Valley Care to San Francisco U.C. Med. Center. The sky was dark that day. And there were weeks of worry and prayer that followed. But that baby is a healthy, happy one-year-old today! Sometimes you have to hold the promise of a rainbow in your heart.

The rainbow in the Book of Genesis is a symbol of God's promise. It is the promise of hope that we cling to in our faith. The story of Noah is more about God than about a human hero. Noah was no hero. He just boarded the ark and took care of himself. (So what if the rest of humanity disappeared?) And then after the flood, the rainbow was a promise, not a reward.

You may remember the film, "Schindler's List." The original book that film came from was titled *Schindler's Ark*, alluding to Noah's ark. Now, Oskar Schindler was no saint. He was a playboy and a philanderer. He was a businessman and a Nazi party member. He wanted to make money from World War II. But something touched him—mercy, maybe—and he started to care about his workers more than himself. Schindler rescued more than a thousand Jews, potential victims of the Nazi Holocaust, by employing them in his factories. By having their names on "Schindler's list," they escaped Auschwitz. After the war, the Jewish community gave Schindler a ring made out of gold fillings with a quotation from the Talmud engraved on it: "Whoever saves one life saves the entire world." In the dark cloud of the Holocaust, stories like this brought—not a full rainbow—but at least a small ray of light (Karen Armstrong, *In the Beginning: A New Interpretation of Genesis*, 43).

The world needed more voices of conscience during the Holocaust. One person, considered by some the greatest voice of conscience of the 20th century, was a pastor and theologian by the name of Reinhold Niebuhr. A documentary has just come out about his life: "An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story." You may not have heard of Reinhold Niebuhr—but many people have. People like Martin Luther King, Jr., Jimmy Carter, Billy Graham, Abraham

Joshua Heschel, Cornell West, Barack Obama, John McCain, and David Brooks have written about his influence on their thinking and their faith. All of these people have looked at the relationship between ethics and politics, and they have pointed to Reinhold Niebuhr as the ultimate voice of conscience of the last century. (We'll be showing the documentary next Sunday at 7:00 p.m. here at Lynnewood.)

The film writer and director, Martin Doblmeier, said, "Niebuhr speaks so clearly about universal issues,...the uses and abuses of power [and] the potential for democracy in our country." Reinhold Niebuhr spoke about how political leaders need a moral compass. He advocated for Christian realism. He started with a realistic appraisal of the human situation and infused it with Christian belief in love, justice, and hope (Jeremy L. Sabella, *An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story*, 121). He worked to get church people to care about the broader world; and he worked to get people outside the church to consider and put into practice religious values (134).

Many religious people today are asking for a new moral compass in America. Many are asking, "What does the life, and death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ mean for us in the 21st century?" Some Christians like to think of resurrection as a personal promise for life after death. But United Methodists say we have both a personal dimension to our faith and a social dimension. We have a history of looking at the intersection of faith and society. So we are called to ask, "What does resurrection mean for our society and world today?" What promise does our faith offer, and what challenge does it present?

In 1951, Reinhold Niebuhr wrote the Serenity Prayer, "God, give me grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, Courage to change the things which should be changed, and the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other" (http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/new-film-on-reinhold-niebuhr-speaks-to-today?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiT1RjM1l6RTNaV0ptT1dFMSIsInQiOiJaUnA1cjNzZlFGOUFNSGpOenBNdEVLSmNXZk9kVzA2TDFRTlE0S2V6MDdYdzJ5XC83czVneUE1NUhvOCtadzVoS1l2VjRVNlY4QUVJY3piRFwvVWdvRnpzK1NDaXEyWlRkdM1CK2lFVmxFRlVQXC9GZnMzT1JjZGswM3B3N3NcL2VXaEcfQ%3D%3D).

What are the things that we can change? Let's look at how the disciples reacted to the empty tomb that Easter morning long ago. Mary Magdalene could not change the fact of Jesus' death, but perhaps she could learn how to deal with it. She was perplexed when she saw the stone rolled away. Peter and the beloved disciple were curious—they ran to see, but they did not understand, and so they went on home. Mary stayed, weeping. She saw angels, then turned and saw a man she thought was the gardener. He spoke her name, and she recognized Jesus.

Something made Mary stay and wait until she encountered Jesus. You don't always see hope right away. Sometimes it's there but in disguise. Maybe you have to wait for it. Maybe you have to live as if you see a rainbow. Maybe you have to believe in promise.

When you believe in God's promise for goodness, then you want to play out goodness in your life. A Bay Area author I like to read is Anne Lamott. She talks about mercy in her new book, *Hallelujah, Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy*.

She says, "Mercy means compassion, empathy, a heart for someone's troubles. It's not something you do—it is something in you, accessed, revealed, or cultivated through use, like a muscle. We find it in the most unlikely places" (51). She's talking about the capacity for mercy, that spark of God in each of us. We have to use it, or it atrophies. And when we exercise mercy, we are responding to God's promise that gives us hope.

Anne Lamott speaks of a wise person at her church (St. Andrew Presbyterian, in Marin City) who says, "I *know* my change is gonna come" (71). She's willing to wait and anticipate that the good news is "gonna come." She believes in promise.

Lamott talks about how then we need to respond to promise. "Pope Francis says the name of God is mercy." Lamott goes on to say, "Our name was mercy, too, until we put it away to become more productive, more admired and less vulnerable. It's our unclaimed selves, in the Lost and Found drawer" (119). Rainbows and resurrection are God's promise that in the darkness there is light, and in death there is new life. Mercy must be our response to hope. We just have to get it out and dust it off.

This month marked the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Beyond Vietnam" speech. In that speech King called for a "true revolution of values." He called for valuing life over death, love over hate, and just peace above all else. How can we respond to the hope of resurrection? Can we take mercy out of the "lost and found drawer"? Can we launch some random acts of kindness? (Please take a bumper magnet from our welcome table today that says "Kindness Matters.") Perhaps there will be another Martin Luther King who will rise up and be a voice of conscience. And perhaps you will join us to "Rise Against Hunger" next Saturday, as we pack meals for hungry people. Maybe we can save a life, just one life. When we realistically look at our world and see children suffering from nerve gas attacks, and we read about Egyptian Coptic Christians dying in their churches on Palm Sunday, and we hear that our nation has used the largest non-nuclear bomb ever in a unilateral strike against ISIS in Afghanistan, what can we do?

I think we need to believe in hope enough to pray, and we need to exercise mercy enough to do something more. Perhaps we can participate in an event at our local mosque or activate mercy by doing something kind for a neighbor who is different from us. We hope to establish an Open Heart Kitchen night at our church, and you can help with that. We can live as if there are rainbows, and we can live in the belief that death can never conquer life.

Even when Jesus had died, Mary waited and hoped that his spirit would linger. Even when Nazis were sending Jews to death camps, Schindler created an ark that would carry many people to safety. Even when violence and hatred seem to take over the world, there are the values of love and mercy that we can promote. Even when all is not well, we can say, "Hallelujah, anyway!" And even when the sky is dark and the future is uncertain, we can believe in rainbows. Why? Because we are people of the promise, and we live by mercy. It's what brings us joy. Just wait a bit; the good news is "gonna come." The love of Jesus is alive; we just need to put it into practice and make this world a better place. "Hallelujah, anyway!"