

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 Easter Sunday ~ 31 March, 2013

World Made New

On the page, scripture is dead. In our lives, scripture comes alive. Easter – the festival of new life – is up to us.

This morning, I want to invoke faith and courage of Biblical proportions. Faith: “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”¹ And courage: from the Old French word for heart: inner strength. We are called to faith and courage to make the world new.

November 14, 1960; New Orleans, Louisiana. Under orders from the President of the United States, gun-toting federal marshals escort six-year-old Ruby Bridges through an angry mob to school,² the only black child in a hostile sea of white children, white parents, white teachers, white police officers, white state police officers who would have let Ruby Bridges die before she integrated that school.³

Each morning, she sits down at her desk in the empty classroom in the empty school building and learns to read and write from Mrs. Barbara Henry of Boston. It is just the two of them: Ruby, and Mrs. Henry.

“Days ... turned into weeks, and weeks ... into months.” The white boycott continued, and Ruby braved “murderously heckling mobs, there in the morning and there in the evening, hurling threats and slurs and hysterical denunciations and accusations at the six year old child.”⁴

¹ Hebrews 11:1

² William Franz Elementary School

³ *Brown v. Board of Education* (May 17, 1954): In a unanimous decision upholding the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution, the United States Supreme Court ruled that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.”

⁴ Robert Coles, *The Moral Life of Children*, p. 22

Years later, Mrs. Henry recalled standing by the classroom window. “I saw Ruby coming down the street,” she said, “with the federal marshals on both sides of her.... A man shook his fist at her; Ruby smiled at him.... A woman spat at [her] but missed; Ruby smiled at her.”⁵

Suddenly, Ruby stopped. She faced the mob of screaming people, and seemed to be speaking to them. The federal marshals tried to move her along, to no avail. Then Ruby stopped talking, turned, and walked into the school.

Mrs. Henry asked her why she stopped to talk. “I wasn’t talking,” said Ruby, “I was praying for them.”

Each morning, six-year-old Ruby Bridges stopped a few blocks away from the school to pray for them. That morning, she had forgotten, until she was in their midst. And so she had stopped.

*Please G*d, she prayed.
Try to forgive those people.
Because even if they say those things,
So You could forgive them,
They don't know what they're doing.
Just like you did those folks a long time ago
When they said terrible things about You.*⁶

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“Ye have heard that it hath been said, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy.’

“But I say unto you, ‘Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;

“‘That ye may be the children of your [G*d]....’”⁷

How is the world made new? Faith, and courage.

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Another story from those early days of racial integration, a true story, as reported by Dr. Robert Coles.

⁵ Robert Coles, *op cit*, pp. 22-23

⁶ Robert Coles, *The Story of Ruby Bridges* (for children)

⁷ Matthew 5:43-45 (Matthew 5 is the Sermon on the Mount)

Atlanta Georgia. The boy – who, to this day, remains anonymous – is fourteen years old, tough, an athlete, a poor student; his family is described as “redneck.”

There was an incident. “I didn’t want any part of them here,” the boy says. “They belong with their own, and we belong with our own – that’s what we all said. Then those two kids came here, and they had a tough time. They were all by themselves. The school had to get police protection for them.

“We didn’t want them, and they knew it. But we told them so, in case they were slow to get the message. I didn’t hold back, no more than anyone else.... [W]ith all the others, ... I said, ‘Go, [expletive deleted], go....’ I meant it.

“But after a few weeks, I began to see *a kid*, not a[n] [expletive deleted] – a guy who knew how to smile when it was rough going, and who walked straight and tall, and was polite. I told my parents, ‘It’s a real shame that someone like him has to pay for the trouble caused by all those federal judges.’

“Then it happened. I saw a few people cuss at him. ‘The dirty [expletive deleted],’ they kept on calling him, and soon they were pushing him into a corner, and it looked like trouble, bad trouble.

“I went over and broke it up. I said, ‘Hey, cut it out.’

“They all looked at me as if I was crazy, my white buddies and the [expletive deleted], too. But my buddies stopped, and the [expletive deleted] left. Before he left, though, I spoke to him.

“I didn’t mean to, actually! It just came out of my mouth. I was surprised to hear the words myself: ‘I’m sorry.’

“As soon as he was gone, my friend gave it to me: ‘What do you mean, “I’m sorry?”’ I didn’t know what to say. I was as silent as the [expletive deleted].... After a few minutes, we went to basketball practice. That was the strangest moment of my life.’

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Dr. Robert Coles writes, “In no time, ... he was beginning to talk ... to the [other kid].

“Soon, he was championing him personally, while still decrying ‘integration.’

“Finally, he [became] ... [his] friend ... [advocating, quote,] ‘an end to the whole lousy business of segregation.’”

Later, Dr. Coles asked him why he did it. An ordinary 14-year-old boy with no role models; a boy with statistically zero chances of a change of heart, who endured a raft of scorn from his family and peers: why did he do what he did?

The boy answered, “I’d be as I was, I guess, but for being there in school that year and seeing that kid – seeing him behave himself, no matter what we called him, and seeing him being insulted so bad, so real bad. Something in me just drew the line, and something in me began to change....”⁸

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“... I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment....

“Therefore, if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother has ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift....” *Love your enemies.*

How is the world made new? Faith, and courage.

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One more story. April 12, 2004; Fallujah, Iraq. A patchy cease-fire takes hold in the battle-torn city as U.S. officials say they are seeking ‘political’ solutions to pacify the area and disband a militia loyal to an anti-American cleric. The move to stress negotiations over military action marks a significant tactical shift for U.S. officials, who until the weekend had been vowing to crush the two insurgencies threatening Iraq’s stability.⁹

⁸ Robert Coles, *The Moral Life of Children*, pp. 27-28

⁹ Nicholas Riccardi and Tony Perry, “Truce Holds as Fallujah Buries Dead” (opening paragraph), *Los Angeles Times*, April 12, 2004. The cease-fire in the report had begun the previous day.

What happened?

The morning of April 3rd, 2004: "...[T]he Army and the Marines were closing in on Baghdad.... [A] small unit of American soldiers was walking along a street in Najaf when hundreds of Iraqis poured out of the buildings on either side, fists waving shrieking, frantic with rage.... [T]hey pressed in on the [soldiers], who glanced at one another in terror."

Watching CNN as this scene unfolds in real time, journalist Dan Baum writes, "From the way the lens was lurching, the cameraman seemed as frightened as the soldiers. This is it, I thought. A shot will come from somewhere, the Americans will open fire, and the world will witness the My Lai massacre of the Iraq war.

"At that moment, an American officer [steps] through the crowd, holding his rifle high over ... head with the barrel pointed to the ground. Against the backdrop of the seething crowd, it [is] a striking gesture – almost Biblical....

"[Impassive behind surfer sunglasses, the officer says,] 'Take a knee.'

"The soldiers [look] at him as if he were crazy. Then, one after another, swaying in their bulky body armor ..., they [kneel] before the boiling crowd and [point] their guns at the ground.

"The Iraqis [fall] silent, and their anger [subsides]. The officer [orders] his men to withdraw."

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It took two months for Dan Baum to track down Lieutenant Colonel Chris Hughes from Red Oak, Iowa. He asks him "who had taught him to tame a crowd by pointing his rifle muzzle down and having his men kneel." Nobody, comes the response. They teach you to fire warning shots, he says, "but the problem with that" – this is a quote – the "problem with that is that the next thing you have to do is shoot them...."

Chris Hughes' mission that day was to make contact with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani; "American gunfire would have made it impossible.

The Iraqis already felt that the Americans were disrespecting their mosque. The obvious solution,” he said, “was a gesture of respect.”¹⁰

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It was dark when a violent mob – “a great multitude with swords and staves ... the chief priests and the scribes and the elders”¹¹ – arrived in Gethsemane to arrest Jesus. Simon Peter drew his sword. “Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,¹² Jesus said. “Put up again thy sword into the sheath,”¹³ “for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.”¹⁴ *Love your enemies.*

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Whatever possessed Jesus to say, “Love your enemies,” and, after him, so many others? Whatever possessed Ruby Bridges to pray; and the anonymous boy to say “Cut it out!” and “I’m sorry;” and Chris Hughes to order his men to kneel in the street? Something bigger than fear; something bigger, even, than death....

Faith: “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”¹⁵ And courage: from the Old French word for heart: inner strength.

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Beloved spiritual companions,

Easter is up to us.

We are called to love and service, justice, and peace.

With faith and courage,

may we answer the call

to make the world new.

¹⁰ Dan Baum, “Battle Lessons,” *The New Yorker*, January 17, 2005. Thanks to Kem Morehead!

¹¹ Mark 14:43

¹² Matthew 26:38

¹³ John 18:10

¹⁴ Matthew 26:52

¹⁵ Hebrews 11:1

