

Sunday, July 6, 2025

Rev. Claire Clyburn at Aldersgate United Methodist Church in Durham, NC

“Practice Resurrection”

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

So today begins my 39th year in pastoral ministry, as John mentioned: the first Sunday of July. So I'm thankful to be spending it with you all. For almost 40 years I've been someone who preaches almost every Sunday. And I would tell you that over those almost 40 years now, the thrust of my preaching has really been about three things.

The first one is this: the grace of God and our absolute need of it. And the shorthand of that for me is a five-word sermon that I say. Almost all my sermons are can be boiled down to these five words: **God loves you. Try harder.**

The second is the power of Scripture to read us, to know more about us than we often will admit to knowing about ourselves, and therefore the opportunity to realign ourselves with God's purposes by finding the “aha!” moment of the good news.

And the third thing is the narrative arc of scripture that points toward themes of justice, what the Bible calls love of neighbor; and righteousness, love of God; and the ways that the triune God makes life and beloved community possible.

Now, that's a fancy way for me to say right off the bat that I'm very smart and I went to school and I know a lot of really important things. The shorthand for what I'm talking about: I can give it to you in two words: **Practice resurrection.**

That's what we're about. Practice resurrection. *Practice* because we don't get it right all the time. Head nods to that. Anybody got that T-shirt? I do. And that's okay because God is grace-filled.

Practice as in make it a habit, the way you might have an exercise practice or a yoga practice.

Practice the way you might give yourself to something that takes your whole life, the way someone might have a musical practice or a medical practice or a preaching practice, something that takes your whole life. And then resurrection, because as Christians, we are people whose lives only make sense if Jesus Christ truly has been risen from the dead. That's what it means to be a Christian. We are people whose lives only make sense if Jesus Christ really has been risen from the dead.

So I can give you a churchy answer to what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, but really “practice resurrection” works just fine for me. In our Scripture for today, Jesus encounters someone who has not been practicing resurrection, who has been practicing the “who can I blame for my life not really being the way I want it” game. And Jesus, he just cuts through all that and he just says to the man, do you want to be made well?

Well church, do you?

What would it look like? How would you know you'd been made well? What would it look like to practice resurrection when your whole life has been lived sitting by the side of the pool? To ask that question, not to answer it, but to ask that question?

This morning I want to tell you a story that I first heard some years ago at a storytelling event that featured Donald Davis.

Now this is his kernel of the story. I'll tell you, I've heard it one time I memorized it and so I think I've made it my own. But it's based on real people the way Donald Davis told the story. And it's a way of asking this question that Jesus asks, do you want to be made well?

In other words, do you want to practice resurrection?

Margaret and Levi Walsh made their living at the Saturday night dance circuits in the Appalachian Mountains. Margaret played piano and Levi played the fiddle, not the violin. They met in Florida at a teen talent show when they were 19 years old. They fell in love with the music they made together and they fell in love with each other and they took their show on the road.

Margaret, she played by ear, you know the type? She just sits down at the piano, she can just go all over the keyboard. She turns her head to smile at everybody like Joanne Castle on the Lawrence Welk show, she doesn't ever have to look at the keys. She just rag tags it all night long. My mother played the piano this way. So it was very dear to me to have. If you have somebody in your life who can do that, you are blessed indeed.

Well, Levi just kind of tried to keep up with Margaret and over the years they had learned how to read each other's cues so instinctively so that Margaret knew just when to lighten up on Cotton Eyed Joe so that Levi's fiddle playing would take center stage. And Levi knew just when to trail off on a solo so the dance partners would take to the floor again.

For more than 50 years, Margaret and Levi traveled the Appalachian mountains' Saturday night dance circuit. They went from Murphy to Pigeon Forge way up in the Shenandoah Valley and back down the mountains of Georgia. They built up a following. Communities learned to save the date that Margaret and Levi would be in town, for it was sure to be a Saturday night like no other. More than one marriage proposal happened in the mountains of North Carolina while Margaret and Levi were showcasing a lifetime's worth of magical pas de deux. She on the piano, he on the fiddle, not the violin.

Now Margaret and Levi lived in an Airstream trailer that they pulled behind an old Ford truck. They didn't need much, they said, 'cause they were always traveling from one town to the next. If you'd ever been in their Airstream, you might not have believed it. Not much furniture and only a small television, "for getting the weather" is what Levi always said. And then piles and piles of bookcases stuffed with sheet music.

"I'll be loving you," and we'd be sitting right on top of Foggy Mountain Breakdown. Songs by Cole Porter and George Gershwin were mingled in with Amazing Grace. A piano lamp sat on top of an old honky tonk piano. You'd have thought it was a player piano until Margaret would suddenly jump up from the table and she'd go and sit down there and bang out Misty, her eyes over her shoulder and her eyebrows raised just so, so that she could cue Levi when to come in.

Well eventually they bought a little house right outside Maggie Valley. The years were beginning to take their toll on Levi especially, and they found they preferred to stay in North Carolina rather than travel all the time. I say, who could blame them for that?

Margaret and Levi continued to play the dance circuit, but just around the Murphy to Asheville region. And their season wasn't quite as long as it used to be. They parked their Airstream in the backyard. You know how people do who just can't get rid of the cars they used to own. And they built a patio nearby.

Now mountain summers are different from our summers. It does get hot during the day. You're only about 15 feet from the sun in the mountains. But the humidity is not nearly as oppressive as what we have. And at night you might want a sweater. Well, Margaret did anyway and she'd put a thin one around her thin shoulders every time they went to the dance hall. They played their repertoire as they had for over 50 years. But one night when they got to the last piece, Lover's Waltz, Levi had to quit in the middle. He sat down and Margaret knew right away something was wrong.

"It is cancer," she said matter of factly to the clerk at the Mast General store, just like you might talk about a stopped up drain. "Levi's got it. The doctor gave him these pills for the pain. They don't seem to do much good though." Levi began to go outside to the Airstream less and less. And in a matter of weeks he spent most of his time on the couch.

Amazingly though, as the weekend came closer, he allowed as how he was feeling some better and maybe they could play in Waynesville after all. And at those words, Margaret grabbed the fiddle and put Levi in the car and they drove into town for their Saturday night show. It went on like this for several months, Levi spending most of his time on the couch until the weekend came and then he would play his heart out. Sometimes Margaret just didn't have the heart to cut him off when he was in the middle of Cotton Eyed Joe, even though she knew by heart the place she was supposed to come in and relieve him.

One day Margaret discovered Levi's secret. Now, I am not a medical person, I'm not a doctor and I am not offering this to you as a medical prescription. I'm just telling you what Levi did, okay? But this was his secret.

Levi spent most of the week on the couch because he was saving his pain medication. He'd go without it Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. And on Thursday he'd begin to take it and he'd add a little bit more on Friday and a little bit more so that by Saturday he was his old self again. As he picked up his fiddle, fitting it exactly where it had rested for 70 years, right under his chin, his fingers instinctively closed around the bow.

And when Margaret started playing the pretty girl milking the cows, he didn't even need to look at her to find his cue. He just started playing and the music itself took over from there.

Levi died before Easter and Margaret spent the spring driving to every town they'd ever played in sprinkling his ashes near the dance halls. By the time she got back to Maggie Valley, the season was starting. She advertised for a fiddler. Margaret interviewed dozens of young hopefuls before she settled on young Tom Watson.

He had studied folk music at Brevard Music College and he was anxious to get practical experience before he headed to Oberlin College later that year. Now, Margaret liked Tom, but he had a habit she could not abide and that is that Tom took forever to tune his violin, not the fiddle.

And as they would practice every song Margaret, you know, Margaret she'd plunge right in and Tom would say: wait, wait, wait just a minute, I gotta tune. Wait, wait, what key are you in? Gimme a minute.

And then he would saw on that violin tuning and tuning till Margaret could literally see the cat scratching every blackboard of every schoolhouse she'd ever been in. Finally he was ready a one and a two and he'd watch her like a hawk coming in when she nodded. Margaret found it frustrating to have to remember to nod to the boy, for Levi had known exactly when to come in.

Well one fella who had heard Margaret and Levi play for years found himself getting a coke next to her at the refreshment table one night during a break.

“How’s young Tom working out? He seems just the slightest bit off, I’d say.”

Margaret’s eyes twinkled.

“He’s playing everything in A but now and then I play in A flat just to shake him up a little bit.”

“He’s no Levi,” said the man, “and what’s with this tuning? Every time y’all finish a number, he wants to stop and tune his, what does he call it? Violin sounds like...”

“Don’t tell me..” said Margaret.

“...Sounds like two cats fighting in your mouth.”

“I know.”

“Did Levi tune like that?” asked the man. “Seem like I don’t remember you all having to stop so often in the middle of a set.”

“Oh,” said Margaret. “You know, some people tune, some people play.”

Church, today, I wish to give you, if you need it, an invitation to think less about tuning and fixin’ to and getting it all right before you take a step and get up. Take up your mat and walk.

Practice resurrection. Find those people, those moments, those movements and gatherings that make your soul come alive. Those opportunities where you can say, “Jesus would say amen to that.” And then join the dance.

To be less afraid of making a wrong step than in remaining frozen. To find where people are practicing resurrection and join them. To be the person, the community who is practicing resurrection and invite others to join you.

This month you are launching here at Aldersgate “Bright Spots” and you’ll be hearing from people who are practicing resurrection and who are leading communities of practice. Now, they may not use the words “practice resurrection” to describe themselves and that’s okay. But I hope you’ll hear something that makes your heart beat a little faster that makes you say, “we could do that here!” and then do it.

You know, one of the things that I’ve noticed over the years and I have to say confessionally it is painful for me to say this. It’s a painful surprise. It’s that often when I have looked for where people are practicing resurrection, you know what I’m gonna say? It’s not always in the church that I have seen it. Can I be honest? It’s not always in the church.

When I see weary and sick people find a sign of life, a moment of joy, often it’s at a birthday party or holding a new baby or realizing God is still creating miracles. It’s people who came up hard getting a new chance at life with people who celebrate the steps toward freedom and wholeness. It’s mama bear hugs and laughter from the depths of your being.

And maybe this has happened to you. I hope it’s happened to you here. I’m certainly not saying it can’t happen in the church. As your District Superintendent hear me clearly, I want it to be happening in the church!

I’m simply saying Joy is waiting for you. Joy wants to be your dance partner.

Do you wanna be made well?

Yes Lord, take my hand and pull me up.

Some people tune and some people play.

Church, let's play.

Let's practice resurrection.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.