**Resurrection Life** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Second Sunday of Easter/Generosity Sun. The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Acts 4:32-35 Saint Paul, Minnesota
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When Gail and I lived in New York City we lived on Cabrini Boulevard. Cabrini Boulevard runs parallel to the Hudson River from the George Washington Bridge in the south to Fort Tryon Park in the north in upper Manhattan where the famous “Cloisters” museum—a branch of the Metropolitan--is located. And in between are some of the most spectacular views of the Hudson River and the New Jersey Palisades on the other side of the river. Lin-Manuel Miranda of Hamilton fame was one of our neighbors. Dr. Ruth Westheimer lived up the street. And in the middle of Cabrini Boulevard is a shrine to the first American Catholic Saint, Mother Cabrini.

Who was Mother Cabrini? Frances Xavier Cabrini was an Italian-American Catholic religious sister. She founded the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a religious institute that was a major support to her fellow Italian immigrants to the United States. Cabrini was the first U.S. citizen to be canonized a saint by the Catholic Church on July 7th, 1946.

And guess what? A major motion picture about her life, titled *Cabrini,* is currently in local theaters—and it’s actually pretty good (it gets a 90% positive rating on Rotten Tomatoes!). The film depicts her life as she encounters resistance to her charity and business efforts in New York City. The film explores the sexism and anti-Italian bigotry faced by Cabrini and others in New York City in the late 19th century.

The movie begins with harsh coughing by Mother Cabrini, played by Cristiana Dell ’Anna, and a doctor telling the young woman she might have two years to live. That doesn’t stop her from seeking a missionary appointment abroad, and Pope Leo XIII (Giancarlo Giannini) sends her from Italy to America to minister to the masses of Italians who have sailed to New York in search of better lives only to find filth, hunger, and discrimination.

Her persistence – to be exhibited throughout the story – results in Mother Cabrini and a small group of other sisters sighting the Statue of Liberty in 1889. They make do with a broken-down building in the city’s Five Points district, searching muddy streets and climbing down sewer ladders to find children they can move into their makeshift orphanage.

The sisters encounter heartaches – such as the death of an orphan boy in an industrial accident – and resistance from racist residents, city officials (John Lithgow plays the mayor) and even the local archbishop (David Morse). Through it all, Mother Cabrini not only survives but succeeds with her ambitious ventures to aid the poor.

The archbishop, portrayed as a captive to city and church politics and resistant to Cabrini’s initiatives on behalf of the poor, eventually develops a grudging respect for her determination and offers buildings and land formerly owned by the Jesuit order to Cabrini so she can build a proper children’s home.

One catch is that water is scarce on the property, but Cabrini and her followers overcome the problem by searching for water and digging a well manually themselves.

Actress Dell ’Anna’s unyielding yet sympathetic face is perfect to convey the grim determination that takes Cabrini well beyond her doctor’s prognosis and past her initial, vague mission to help disadvantaged immigrants. She manages to open a hospital with funds from New York Italian, Irish and Jewish groups and even travels to Rome to ask for money from the Italian Senate to finish the project.

At one point, the pope questions Cabrini’s motives, wondering whether she is trying to create her own empire instead of doing the work of God. She replies that she wants *“an empire of hope.”*

As the film ends, we are told that Cabrini lived to be 67 years old, establishing 67 missionary institutions for the sick and poor in New York, Chicago, Seattle, New Orleans, Denver, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and throughout Latin America and Europe. She became a U.S. citizen in 1909, and in 1946, an estimated 120,000 people filled Soldier Field in Chicago when the Catholic Church canonized her as the first American saint.

Quite a life. Ask yourself: What would compel someone in poor health to take on such arduous tasks, against all odds, with little hope of succeeding? How did she turn nothing into something?—hospitals, schools, orphanages that eventually spanned the globe?

There may be some answers in our text from Acts this morning. But first, travel back in time with me to the Spring of 2020, and the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Covid touched just about every area of our lives and left an indelible mark on us.

One of my most vivid memories was going into the grocery store and seeing the shelves bare in the toilet paper aisle. People were so scared by the possibility of supply-chain interruptions that they panic-bought toilet paper.

It’s just what happens when we allow fear and scarcity to dictate our decision making, isn’t it? We end up gathering and holding more than we need while others struggle to even find enough.

The book of Acts, however, paints a drastically different picture of the early community of Jesus followers. You see, the resurrection of Jesus had such a dramatic and profound impact on them that it caused them to think differently about everything—even their possessions. Their newfound faith in the risen Jesus cultivated a spirit of generosity and compassion so great that it became unacceptable for anyone in the community to go without their basic needs being met.

And, interestingly, (according to Josh Scott), when describing the earliest Jesus followers and what bound them together in community, Luke doesn’t list the doctrinal positions they held in common. He doesn’t describe them as gathering in a room to argue the finer points of theology so that, once they all agreed, they could really belong together. Instead, he says the testimony of the apostles to Jesus’ resurrection led to real, practical, life-changing action in the world, as evidenced by the fact that *“there was not a needy person among them.”*

Perhaps this is what Easter is actually all about, not theory but practice. It’s the bursting into this world of a new creation that plays by different rules, where love calls us to work for the flourishing of every single person and of the whole creation.

And this is the same vision that inspired Mother Cabrini as she sought the flourishing of the poorest of the poor in New York City and many other places.

For example, Cabrini organized catechism and education classes for the Italian immigrants and provided for many orphans' needs. She established schools and orphanages despite tremendous odds. She was as resourceful as she was prayerful, finding people who would donate what she needed in *money, time, labor, and support.*

People responded to Mother Cabrini because *in her* life they saw Jesus. But do people see Jesus in us?

I’ve been re-reading Gregory Boyle’s 2018 book *Barking to the Choir*. Early in the book, Father Boyle makes reference to a *New Yorker* profile of American Baptists that relayed the resignation of one of the congregation’s leaders to the fact that *“secular culture”* would always be *“hostile”* to Christianity. *“I don’t believe this is true,”* says Boyle. *“Our culture is hostile only to the inauthentic living of the gospel.”*

But what is it that people in our culture want to see? Do they want to see impossibly perfect lives? Do they want to see a kind of purity? Do they want to see us in our glory, drawing lines in the sand, excluding the unrighteous?

No. They want to see the spirit of Jesus alive in us--as described in Acts 4. There we read that the people held all things in common; they cared for the needy. Acts says that *“great grace was upon them all.”* Perhaps it sounds naïve to our ears, but when we can no longer see Jesus, when those around us can no longer see Jesus, they are looking for him in our lives. They are looking for him in communities of faith that care for those who are needy, that sacrifice rather than hoard, which include rather than exclude, that listen before speaking.

I don’t think our response to Acts ought to be to idealize the early church. It had its own set of issues and challenges. Instead, we are invited, even called, to join in and continue the work the early church began. To be an Easter people is not just to hold some specific theological convictions and defend them at all costs. To be an Easter people is to join in the work of stewarding a new creation that is already emerging, right here and now.

Like Mother Cabrini—and so many others.

Perhaps we’ll discover something similar *here*. Resurrection life keeps happening—and it’s all around us—for those who have eyes to see.