

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN - RESURRECTION
John 20:1-18
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I sometimes wonder why we're here this morning- why all over the world this morning people in unprecedented numbers, people who don't ordinarily come to public worship, or probably more accurately, people who attend occasionally - all are here today. One thing for sure - there are a lot of us today.

In one of his books, Peter Gomes, minister of Memorial Church at Harvard University, has an entire section on the peculiar behavior of people and ministers on Easter. There is, he says, "a primal, almost homing instinct to church" on Easter, with the predictable result that churches are so full, some can't get in ... a problem we have here occasionally. Gomes says he recently heard an angry visitor to Memorial Church at Harvard attacking the usher who had just told him there was no space left. "What do you mean, there's no space. You've got to let me in. I've got my rights. You can't keep me out of church." He represented the same kind of disappointed crowd that gets left out of a rock concert or sporting event.

The preachers, on the other hand, behave equally curiously. The secret delight of clergy is that we live all year for a morning like this. We know better, of course, but we can't resist the notion that you've come to hear us ... and this year we'll get it so right, it will happen again next Sunday. And so what the preacher does, for some reason, is scold the congregation for coming. Gomes remembers a pastor of his youth who one Easter Sunday "let out a year's accumulated bile..." and who welcomed the huge Easter morning congregation by "wishing them a Happy Memorial Day, a Glorious Fourth of July, a Good Labor Day, a Peaceful Veteran's Day and a Gracious Thanksgiving. He did this with a smile, while making the point that not only did he not expect to see them again before next Easter, but he was annoyed, and so was God. The large congregation of course blushed and tittered, and waited for him to get it out of his system."

The problem with the preacher, of course, is that we're afraid we're not up to this job. And we're right. The Easter message simply exceeds anybody's ability and so we comfort ourselves with the hype that you'll enjoy the great hymns, anthems and beautiful flowers. Our frustration this morning is that we have more to say than we know how to say.

Where in the world are you able to see life overcoming death? That is resurrection. Where have you experienced the astonishing power of love to heal, to forgive, to build up, to make whole again? That is resurrection. Where in your personal pilgrimage have you known the sheer power of hope against all odds? That is the resurrection.

We are not celebrating an idea today, but rather an experience which began to happen on the first day of the week after the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth in 33 A.D. The Lutheran Church of Marblehead, Massachusetts held a religious arts festival one time and invited a young New England writer to submit a piece of work. John Updike wrote a poem for the occasion entitled, "Seven Stanzas for Easter," in which he said:

"Make no mistake: if He rose at all it was as His body: ...

"It was not as the flowers each soft spring recurrent: it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and befuddled eyes of the eleven apostles; it was as His flesh: ours...

"Let us not mock God with metaphor, analogy, sidestepping transcendence; making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded credulity of earlier ages: let us walk through the door..."

And then, this wonderful line:

"Let us not seek to make it less monstrous, for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty..."
(*Telephone Poles and Other Poems*, p. 72)

It is not simply a metaphor. The resurrection of Jesus does not mean that his ideas are immortal. It is about an event so radical, so monstrous in Updike's vivid imagery, as literally to defy description. It is about an event which totally and utterly turns the tables on the human story. It is so astonishing that we shield ourselves from it, I think, hiding behind metaphors and symbols and seasonal flowers. We ought, on occasions, to try it like it is south of the Equator, where most of the Christians in the world now live, by the way; where Easter is in the fall and resurrection is celebrated as nature is dying. It would prevent us, at least, from hopelessly confusing the radical Good News of the Gospel with the marvelous but not particularly Christian discovery, that in response to a little more direct sunlight, dormant bulbs sprout shoots, and hormones begin to flow, and animals make little animals: a nice arrangement that, but not what resurrection is about!

The Resurrection, Madeleine L'Engle wrote, is "like looking directly into the sun: Easter is almost too brilliant for me..." (*The Irrational Season*, P. 99)

What is recoverable historically? The theologians tell us that is the wrong question, that modern, western men and women are products of the enlightenment which produced the scientific method: that we have been weaned on the concept that a precondition of truth is of verifiable evidence, and that there are other ways to approach this matter. And when we hear that astute theological advice most of us, I think, say to ourselves: "Ho hum! I still want to know what happened."

It is helpful, at the outset, to acknowledge that we don't know what happened. We know quite a bit about what happened subsequently, and about what happened to the people involved and how they felt. But we don't know a thing about what happened before dawn at the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. There will be no conclusive evidence. The earliest records of the Christian experience, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, are curiously restrained. They don't even attempt to chronicle the event. There are later attempts, flashier and more dramatic. The apocryphal Gospel of Peter, written around 150 A.D. includes a detailed, sequential description of the stone rolling away and Jesus walking out of the tomb. It never made it into the Bible: the early church realized it was not an authentic description and, I believe, the early Christians had a wonderful sense of awe which kept them from approaching this event too closely. The accounts are restrained, held at arm's length, seen through soft filters. They are impressionist paintings, not photographs.

The first Biblical mention of the resurrection is Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. The

earliest written reference is in Paul's first letter to the early Christian Church in Corinth. Both are testimony. Both bear witness to the power of the experience of the risen Christ. Neither point to an empty tomb so much as to the startling new life experienced by the writer.

The critical question on Easter Sunday, then, is not did it happen, but does it happen: not, was the resurrection real, but is it a reality that has anything to do with me? The conclusive evidence, therefore, is not in history so much as life itself, and our personal experiences. The documentation will be in those times and places which know the power of love and life over death.

Crucifixion, that is to say, is the starting place. It happened. There seems to be no serious disagreement about that. But there is a tendency in us, I think, to spend as little time as possible dealing with it. Who, after all, wants to think about death, dying, an execution yet? There's already enough grimness and sadness in the world, isn't there?

The theologians have always known that we would prefer not to take death seriously: not Jesus' death, not death as a powerful force at work in the world, not our own death. We will work hard to avoid all three. We will eliminate the power and the reality of Jesus' death by suggesting that he knew he would be raised from the dead so death wasn't terribly frightening, or that he wasn't fully human so he didn't experience dying in the ultimate and final way human beings do. Aesthetically, we clean up the problem of crucifixion in Protestantism, by eliminating the crucifix and never, never displaying Jesus actually on that cross. And we avoid the reality of our own death - by denying it.

But it is in the midst of death that the resurrection happens. It is at the cross that faith starts to really see love prevailing. Theologically, the resurrection of Jesus assures us that the God who created us will not abandon us to death. L'Engle said that wonderfully: "...the joyful God of love who shouted the galaxies into existence is not going to abandon any iota of his creation." (p. 108)

The resurrection means that love prevails over the power of death. Presbyterian theologian Horace Allen likes to quip that in history you can always tell who the Christians are because they insist on singing at funerals. Just at the awful moment, when the race stares into the chasm of nothingness, just when poets and bards are lamenting the plight of meaninglessness, Christian men and women are breaking into doxologies. Love prevails. God is God of the end as well as the beginning: Lord of dying as well as birthing. Life is God's idea. Love is its source. Death is swallowed up in that.

Some years ago, when his wife was gravely ill, Martin Marty found comfort in a Gabriel Marcel drama. One character says to another, "To say that one loves a being means, "Thou, at least, thou shalt not die." And then Marty editorialized..."Easter sunrise I recommend that we all look up and down the pew or along the lakeshore or hillside at gathered beloveds..." and recall that "love is stronger than death ... Thou shalt not die ... the resurrected Christ says that to those bonded to him in new life..." (*The Christian Century*, 4/15/91)

The resurrection is documented and celebrated wherever there is life in the midst of death. Berthold Brecht remarked that there are many ways to kill a person beside physical assault:

starvation, overwork, oppression, war, ignorance. Something precious about our humanity is reduced, negated, denied by powers over which we have no control. That is what death in the midst of life means: shattered dream, lowered expectations, daily life reduced to a struggle for survival, or food, or freedom, or sanity, or dignity, or wholeness. The resurrection of Jesus Christ here becomes radically personal. It points to life in the middle of that kind of death.

Wherever life is overcoming death - there the power of the resurrection is evident: there - simply put - is the risen Christ. Language strains and bends with the weight of that: we are not talking about ghosts and apparitions, but a power in the midst of the life of the world.

It happens unexpectedly: it happens in your heart and mine, not in predictable times and places always, but suddenly, without warning ... when a child, dribbling a basketball after an Interfaith Hospitality Network Dinner, learns that the future includes a few new possibilities, because of this church ... when a hungry family sits down to a meal ... when a homeless mother and baby have a place to live ... when an unemployed man finds a job ... when into a fast and furious life of driving hard, someone gives love and acceptance and grace ... when guilt is met with forgiveness ... when self hatred is countered by steady grace. The resurrection happens whenever life is overcoming the powers of death. The risen Christ is present whenever love prevails.

Where is it for you? The resurrection of Jesus Christ will have reality for you, not merely in the seasonal customs - lovely as they are, nor the family closeness admirable as that is, nor the heroic music - inspiring as it can be. The resurrection of Jesus Christ will have reality for you precisely where the powers of death and life confront one another.

It is a secret place for most of us. It is where you are struggling against some long odds and aren't sure of the outcome. It is where we harbor our failures, or our fear of failure. Death and life meet at just that point where we contemplate not striving, not caring, not loving, not living any more because we have been disappointed. It is a secret place where we hurt deeply because the causes we support and pray for and desperately want to succeed, aren't. It is the place where we take the measure of our lives: and ache because a once bright career is stalled, and a once vital marriage is stale, and a once gentle and loving family circle has come apart. It is that place where we, secretly, take the measure of the years and decide not to get involved in this or that cause because we aren't going to live long enough to see the difference. It is that secret place in each one of us, where boredom turns desperate and becomes heartache, stomach knotted.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the radical suggestion that there is a power on the side of life - available to use - in those secret places. God will not forget us. God does not forget us now.

In that same Updike poem I quoted earlier, he wrote: "The stone is rolled back, not papier mache, not a stone in a story, but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow grinding of time will eclipse for each of us the wide light of day."

Jesus Christ is risen. Death did not contain the love of God. Thanks be to God.. Alleluia! Happy Easter! Amen.