

Easter Day C (4/21/2019)

Acts 10:34-43

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

**Luke 24:1-12**

*The first resurrection didn't preclude all the crucifixions that followed. No, death is the last, not the first, enemy to be destroyed. God doesn't rescue us from suffering and death, but accompanies us in and through them, that in the end we might no longer look for the living among the dead, but among all those who share in the life of resurrection.*

I wish the first resurrection had prevented all the crucifixions that have taken place since. Truthfully, I wish the good news that first Easter morning had been *Christ is risen! All suffering and death are at an end!* Alleluia indeed. That would have been a celebration for the ages, the decisive turning point in history between pain and joy, between fragility and immortality. *Christ is risen, and you will never die!* There would be no need for seasons of the church year, in any case – no Advent or Christmas or Epiphany, certainly no Lent. Instead, it would be Easter forever, heaven on Earth.

But, that isn't the good news. In the first place, the empty tomb in itself is no proof of Jesus' resurrection, but only the testimony of the heavenly messengers who appear to the women there: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen!" Neither are the implications of Jesus' resurrection immediately clear. The women are "perplexed" and "terrified," nevertheless they faithfully report what they've witnessed to the men. Peter is "amazed" to find the tomb as the women have described it, but his amazement is no indication that he understands what Easter morning means.

What exactly is the significance of the resurrection?

Many would say that it's a fantasy. Set against the backdrop of human hostility and suffering over the centuries – set against the inevitability and callousness of death – the story of the resurrection is, frankly, too good to be true. The crucifixion, on the other hand, that's entirely believable, although it's difficult to imagine why divinity would willingly submit to abusive power. Still, the crucifixion epitomizes all the horrible pain human beings are capable of inflicting on each other. The cross looks like the world we know.

But, the resurrection is implausible. God does not fall victim to cruelty, only to defy it with new possibilities for life. Our grief is never overcome by hope, not entirely. And, people certainly don't rise from the dead. If you're thinking similar thoughts this Easter morning, you're in good company. The disciples themselves cannot accept the news of the resurrection, so they dismiss it as an "idle tale." Maybe you do, too.

Of course, the community of Jesus' followers eventually incorporated the resurrection into their worldview. It must have meant something to them, otherwise they wouldn't have written the story down for posterity. It must have meant something to them, otherwise they wouldn't have formed countercultural communities across the known world, joining new members to the body of Christ through the waters of baptism, retelling his story, and celebrating his holy supper Sunday after Sunday. It must have meant something to them, otherwise martyrs wouldn't have gone to their own untimely deaths clinging to the hope of new life.

The resurrection means everything to the communion of saints, nevertheless it remains elusive to so many of us. Ironically, faith has a way of throwing into sharp relief

the reasons for doubt; hope has a way of making us more sensitive to the causes for hopelessness.<sup>1</sup> *I believe, Lord; help my unbelief!*<sup>2</sup>

How are we to celebrate the promise of abundant life in Christ, for instance, in light of the mysterious illness that wastes a loved one's mind as it gradually, relentlessly wastes his body? How are we to celebrate the promise of abundant life in Christ in light of white supremacist terrorism? How are we to celebrate the promise of abundant life in Christ in light of intractable wars that grind countless innocents under the wheels of their terrible machinery?

**If the story of the resurrection is nothing more than a pretty screen to shield our eyes from pain and death – if it's nothing more than an anesthetic – then it's miserably insufficient. No, only when we have looked upon the cross without averting our eyes can we peer into the empty tomb with a stirring of hope. Only when we have known in our bones the barrenness of winter can we sing, "Now the green blade rises." Only when we have faced the severity of death can we dare to claim the final victory of life.**

In the wake of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination on April 4th, 1968, political cartoonist Bill Mauldin published an illustration of Mahatma Gandhi greeting Dr. King in the next life. Holding his hands out to King, Gandhi remarks, "The odd thing about assassins, Dr. King, is that they think they've killed you."<sup>3</sup> Even as these two figures were tragically acquainted with crucifixion, they were also famously provoked by resurrection, that is, by a vision for life that was larger than the death-dealing ways of the world they knew.

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<sup>1</sup> See Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, 11-12.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 9:24.

<sup>3</sup> See Robert Cady Sailer, *Theologia Crucis*, 61-2.

**What would happen if we took resurrection as seriously as we take death?**

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?” heaven’s envoys ask, *Why have you come to find ultimate truth in a tomb?* There is a way in which our skepticism, our grief, our attentiveness to places of death protects us. “We choose to stay with what we know in our hearts to be dead,” writes one interpreter, “because it is safe,”<sup>4</sup> because it is predictable. The God of both cross and resurrection, however, is anything but predictable. **God-with-us refuses to deal violently with a violent people, but instead transforms violence itself, surrendering to the world’s killer instinct in order that he might offer us mercy and peace.**<sup>5</sup> And living again, he extends to us the same promise of new life: *The odd thing about death, my beloved, is that it thinks it has killed you.*

Dear friends, the first resurrection didn’t preclude all the crucifixions that followed. No, death is the last, not the first, enemy to be destroyed. God doesn’t rescue us from suffering and death, but God accompanies us in and through them, that in the end we might no longer look for the living among the dead, but among all those who share in the life of resurrection. Alleluia, thanks be to God!

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<sup>4</sup> Nancy Claire Pittman, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2, 351.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 23:34; John 20:19, 21.