

THREATENED WITH RESURRECTION

The Sunday of the Resurrection: Easter Day

April 16, 2017

I'm filled with joy and hope on Easter, but I still, once again this year, don't know a thing for sure about what happens after death. I am confident about what happens after death. I feel certain that God's purposes lead us beyond what seems like the end of consciousness. But do I *know* it, as a fact? I do not. What, after all, do we know—what, after all, *can* we know—about miracles and mysteries?

When I was a boy in Iowa and attending Sunday School and confirmation class, we were taught a pretty clear idea of what the afterlife would be. We would die and lie in our graves awaiting the Second Coming of Christ. At that time we would all be raised from the dead to be judged and assigned quarters in either hell or heaven. In those teachings, heaven and hell appeared to be places, like Tahiti or the bowels of a volcano. (You remember that in the movie *Field of Dreams*, the character asks, "Is this heaven?" And the answer is, "No, it's Iowa." None of us growing up in Iowa were tempted to confuse the two, although it's flattering to believe that it's possible.)

On Easter we celebrate Christ's resurrection, and we look forward to the resurrection of the body. We Christians over the centuries aren't quite sure exactly what that means, either: you remember that St. Paul feels sure that it's a *spiritual* body that we're talking about. As if to emphasize that reality, the

disciples on the road to Emmaus don't recognize the resurrected Christ; nor does Mary Magdalene in this morning's Gospel.

We sometimes think of life after death as being about the immortality of the soul, yet another idea that we haven't been clear and consistent about over the centuries. While the resurrection of the body is a Christian and a Biblical reality, the immortality of the soul is not. It is not *Biblical*, that is, although it has become Christian. It was introduced into the church later, through the influences of Greek thought, and it's been a part of our thinking ever since, but without much warrant from scripture. To understand life after death we need all the help we can get, and we've taken that help wherever we can find it. But so far the mystery has remained a mystery.

What does the Episcopal Church teach about this? Here is what our Catechism says (p. 862):

Q. What do we mean by heaven and hell?

A. By heaven, we mean eternal life in our enjoyment of God; by hell, we mean eternal death in our rejection of God.

You notice that there's nothing specific in those words about divine or infernal geography.

I no longer have that certainty or clarity about what and where heaven is that I was offered in my small-town church. But now I feel more joy and have

more hope and confidence about resurrection truths *in this life and beyond* this life.

It's because Jesus' *life* was about resurrections, not just his death. Yes, he appeared again after his death. He appeared to urge his followers to new life, new ministries in his name. But while he walked the earth the first time, he was a dealer in “resurrections” of many kinds: he healed illnesses both physical and mental; he brought the Samaritan woman and the man born blind to new life, and he brought Lazarus back to life. I have seen, and I will bet that you have seen as well, enough lives changed and made new by the power of faith to bear witness to the reality of resurrections in the here and now, in God's present time. What heaven is beyond my grave and yours is still God's mystery, but the Gospels and the church say that heaven is also a state of grace in this life.

Every day, in fact, we are *threatened with resurrection*. I take this phrase from the title of a defiantly joyous poem by a Guatemalan poet, Julia Esquivel. It evokes the mystery of joy and redemption in the face of—and even as a result of—betrayal, violence and suffering. She sees resurrection springing up from an unlikely source, the response of her people to murders of Guatemalan villagers by terror squads.

Here are the first sections of the poem, in translation:

There is something here within us
 which doesn't let us sleep, which doesn't let us rest,
 which doesn't stop pounding deep inside,

it is the silent, warm weeping
of Indian woman without their husbands,
it is the sad gaze of the children
fixed there beyond memory,
in the very pupil of our eyes
which during sleep, though closed, keep watch
with each contraction of the heart
in every awakening...

What keeps us from sleeping
is that they have threatened us with resurrection!
Because at each nightfall,
though exhausted from the endless inventory
of killings since 1954,
yet we continue to love life,
and do not accept their death!

...Because in their marathon of Hope,
there are always others to relieve us
in bearing the courage necessary
to arrive at the goal which lies beyond death...

It comes not just from the loving memory of the dead, but also from
their killers. Easter comes through the cross. Judas and Pilate and Calvary are
all God's steps on the way to the empty tomb.

Easter is a great weight removed from our hearts, a weight as great as the
stone that blocks the tomb. I think of it as a weight formed both of our own
natures and our own doing. There is a view that sin, or evil, comes from
laziness in matters great and small, a kind of lassitude. We lack the strength of
will and imagination to be and do what God intends. Until history gave us
Jesus of Nazareth. Now we know what love can do.

So all of us who inhabit the kingdom of the lazy, all of us who are cool, or casual, or timid, or grandiose, or arrogant, are threatened with resurrection. We are threatened with it because we have to suffer through our defects, our weaknesses and our shameful acts until we come out—until God brings us out—on the resurrection side. Just as Christ’s resurrection was a world-changing mystery, our resurrections will be life-changing mysteries.

This knowledge, which is a knowledge of the heart, is the greatest of gifts. It constitutes a kind of resurrection. It is ours when we open our full selves to it—although sometimes the Holy Spirit breaks into our lives, and to our pain and chagrin and our joy, forces that great gift of grace upon us. We may suffer a terrible illness and discover in God’s time that it has made our living deeper and richer. Through grace we manage to learn from the harm we have done to those we have loved or still love just how much we have to learn about love and about ourselves. We learn that living in the love of Christ arms us to for enjoying the abundance of life. We learn about surviving and prevailing against the disasters that life has in store for us, whether we bring them upon ourselves or not. We celebrate these gifts, but we don’t appreciate them fully without fear and apprehension about what those worst things might be. They weighed upon Jesus, and they weigh upon us. We are threatened with resurrection.

Julia Esquivel ends her poem with her own kind of triumph:

*Accompany us then on this vigil
and you will know what it is to dream!
You will then know
how marvelous it is
to live threatened with Resurrection!*

*To dream awake,
to keep watch asleep,
to live while dying,
and to already know oneself
resurrected!*

Alleluia! He is risen! And because we know and live in his love, we rise to new life through him. Alleluia!

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