

## THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST

Scripture: John 20:11-18, RSV

Since the first orbiting space flight, and especially since the first “walk” in space, most of us have imagined the nightmare of “shooting past” the gravitational pull of earth into the nothingness of space. The nightmare is that we are in a spaceship and somehow the speed of the spaceship is miscalculated and we are pushed out of the gravitational pull of the earth into the nothingness of space. Perhaps even worse than that is to be on a spacewalk and have the tether that unites us to the spacecraft sever, and we eventually drift, endlessly, in the nothingness of space.

Try to internalize that image. Imagine this life that we live of 60 to 70 years as the three-minute ride through space in a rocketship. At the end of the trip we find out that there is no future, only the void, the emptiness, the nothingness. Many thinkers have described the modern predicament in precisely those terms. They tell us that we are just a mere speck floating in a vast universe with no reason to be here, no place to go, nothing to hold us. That experience of the void is a much more pervasive experience than we imagine. We may not feel it because of our particular beliefs but many people do. That kind of tragic view of the world comes very close to what the first disciples experienced over the weekend after Jesus’ crucifixion.

When the morning of Jesus’ resurrection quietly crawled over the horizon, Mary Magdalene, Peter, John and all the others felt this nothingness. They looked into a future that had absolutely no point to it. They told themselves Saturday night there will be no victory over Rome; there will be no kingdom of God with Jesus Christ as our Lord. All we’ve got now is a lot of promises and meaningless hopes.

The peculiarity of the human race is that we can only live by looking to the future. This is especially true when we are trying to live through a great tragedy or a disappointment. In the most difficult moments of our existence, our salvation is our capacity to believe in the future. To say that we must believe in the future is another way of saying that we ought to have hope—that we cannot endure the present very often unless there is something about the future that gives us hope.

C. S. Lewis, in his book, *A Grief Observed*, describes the odyssey of his own life when his wife passed away. He talks about the feeling that you are just going around in circles. Even though life continues, it doesn’t seem to have any direct root. In the brilliant way in which he is able to take the proper image to convey the idea, Lewis says this: “Grief is like a long valley, a winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape.” As I have already noted, not every bend does. Sometimes the surprise is the opposite one; you are presented with exactly the same sort of country you thought you had left behind miles ago. That is when you wonder whether the valley isn’t a circular trench. But it isn’t. There are partial recurrences, the sequence doesn’t repeat. There is a future.

Victor Frankl in his book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, makes this comment:

The prisoner who had lost faith in the future—his future—was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay.

Then he tells a story about a particular prisoner to illustrate his point.

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I once had a dramatic demonstration of a close link between the loss of faith, the future and dangers of giving up, he says. "F," my senior block warden, a fairly well-known composer and librettist confided to me one day. "I would like to tell you something, doctor, I have had a strange dream. A voice told me that I could wish for something, that I should only say what I wanted to know and all my questions would be answered. What do you think I asked?—That I would like to know when the war would be over for me. You know what I mean, doctor, for me. I wanted to know when we, our camp, would be liberated from our suffering. "When did you have this dream?" I asked. "February 1945," he answered. It was then the beginning of March. "What did your dream voice answer?" He whispered to me, "March 30<sup>th</sup>." Now when "F" told me about his dream he was still full of hope and convinced that the voice of his dream would be right. But as the promised day drew nearer the war news that reached our camp made it appear very unlikely that we would be free on the promised date. On March 29<sup>th</sup>, "F" suddenly became ill and ran a high temperature. On March 30<sup>th</sup>, the day that, his prophecy told him that the war and suffering would be over for him, he became delirious and lost consciousness. On March 31<sup>st</sup> he was dead. To all outward appearances he had died of typhus.

The disciples were at this point after the crucifixion. But when Jesus rose from the dead, they were given the faith to believe that there was a future, there was hope, something to look forward to. One of the saddest things that can happen to a person is to get to a point in your life when the only thing that you can do is look back. Everything worth living for, that had any meaning, is in the past. If you come to that point, that is the beginning of the end of your life. But Jesus' resurrection means that every single end that we experience is only the beginning. The end is the beginning of life. Where Jesus is there is life and there is a future.

In Colossians Paul tries to show the early believers what it means to have this kind of hope on the basis of the resurrection. He talks about it as an experience of the resurrection in his life.

If you are then "risen" with Christ, reach out for the highest gifts of Heaven, where Christ reigns in power. Give your heart to the heavenly things, not to the passing things of earth. For, as far as this world is concerned, you are already dead, and your true life is a hidden one in God, through Christ...Don't tell one another lies any more, for you have finished with the old man and all he did and have begun life as the new man, who is out to learn what he ought to be, according to the plan of God. In this new man of God's design there is no distinction between Greek and Hebrew, Jew or gentile, no foreigner or savage, slave or free man. Christ is all that matters, for Christ lives in them all. As, therefore, God's picked representatives of the new humanity, purified and beloved of God himself, be merciful in action, kindly in heart, humble in mind. Accept life, and be most patient and tolerant with one another, always ready to forgive if you have a difference with anyone. Forgive as freely as the Lord has forgiven you. And, above everything else, be truly loving Col. 3:1-3, 5-13, Phillips).

Where Jesus is, there is life—abundant, vigorous, passionate.

What does it mean to have a genuine future? It means that every day presents new challenges, new visions, new opportunities, hopes and accomplishments. I am not content to live in the past. That is what it means to be risen with Jesus Christ.

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The resurrection also means something else and we ought not to forget this as it too is a heritage of the past. The resurrection means that we ought never to become accustomed to death. Death should not be allowed to define our lives. When you and I get used to suffering and the destructive forces that exist in the world, we are in real trouble.

Young people in the best years of their lives are unemployed for prolonged periods—one becomes used to it. Hopelessness causes them to become addicts, dependent on drugs—one becomes used to it. In order to be able to buy the stuff out of which their false dreams are fashioned, they daily need money and so become muggers. People are waylaid in broad daylight, knocked down and robbed—one becomes used to it...day after day we admit death into our life, because we shrink from the conflict and no longer have a passionate devotion to life. (Jurgen Moltmann, *The Passion for Life*, trans. M. Douglas Meeks, Phila: Fortress Press, 1977.)

We are accustomed to the threat of nuclear destruction, to stories about mass starvation, to the ecological disasters that we expect to come any day now. Because we are used to it, we get apathetic. Gradually the passion for life diminishes; the power to resist death dissipates. Like the man in Frankl's story, whenever we pinpoint the time in the future when hope will die, it is almost at that precise moment that we die. We live on hope, almost literally. The resurrection says that we don't have to live on vain hope but that we can have the courage to believe that Jesus Christ has conquered not only death in the sense of living forever, but also conquered death in the sense that we experience it everyday, the terrible pain, suffering, loneliness, isolation; Christ has given us all hope for a future. There is no doubt about the fact that, regardless of your philosophical problems with evil, eternal life as the Bible pictures it is going to be a reality in the future. When we attach importance to evil in the present to the point that we think God can't exist because things are so bad, then we are saying that the present is more real than the future. The Bible says that the future is more real than anything in the present. God is the God of the future.

But Jesus was not just merely interested in the life after death: He was interested in the life before death. He talked about giving us the abundant life. Wherever the lepers were accepted with all of their ugliness and the fear of contagion by Jesus, there was life. Wherever sins were forgiven and people not punished to be made to feel guilty, there was life. Should we be surprised that such a Man would attract the demon possessed, the lame, blind, and the dumb? Jesus loved life so passionately that He loved other people, no matter who they were. He was free to enjoy life. Yet all through the enjoyment of His life, Jesus suffered because He cared. When He said "He who would find his life must lose it, and he who would lose his life for my sake will find it," He was really saying something like this: If I hold onto myself, if I try to trap the happiness that I have and keep it to myself, and if I refuse to risk my life by going outside to care for other people and love them, my own life will die.

In the life that we can have in Christ that Paul talks about, we surrender ourselves; we spend ourselves, expose and risk ourselves. And in this passionate self-giving to other people, our lives become more alive because we are making other people more alive.

What oppresses us in the hour of death is not the life that has been lived to the full and which we have loved intensely and completely, but rather the life that has not been lived, the life that has neglected its possibilities. Indeed, an un-lived, wasted life cannot die. It is already dead. On a large scale today there seems to be an inability of people to die. They can't face it. I think that this is the bitter price that

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most people have paid for lacking love in their lives. Only the passion of love can make a person alive right down to his fingertips and make him ready and able to die.

In the early church, this new life in Christ took a particular expression in most of the epistles. There was a problem that forced the early believers to ask themselves whether or not they really did have a new life in Christ. The expression that it took was the capacity of the early believers really to enjoy friendship with people who were totally different. The Jews had to learn to accept the Gentiles that they had once despised. And the Gentiles had to learn to be friends with the Jews.

Today we don't have the Jew-Gentile problem to the extent that we had it then, but there are other kinds of problems within and without the church with groups accepting each other. But there is one group in society that I would like to pinpoint as a particular example of our need to experience what it means to be risen in Christ. All of us have certain people that we like to have around. They think like we do, like the same things. The rest of the people we tolerate at various levels. A few of us can't tolerate some people at all. In our achievement oriented society there is one group that we have learned merely to tolerate: the mentally and the physically handicapped. We are nervous around such people and very defensive in our reactions. It is interesting that our inability to accept them poses a greater handicap than their handicaps. We give them the worst handicap of all: human isolation and rejection. It is hard to see the human being when you see such a person because you can only see the deformity. The deformity stares you right in the face and you can't see past it to the person. And so such people become outcasts who are isolated and miserable. Because of our attitudes to these people, we frequently treat them as if they were our problem. But the truth is that we are their problem. The new life in Jesus Christ wipes that away.

Jesus' passion for life and for people made Him friendly to the handicapped, to the outcasts. We have no evidence in the New Testament that every single person that came by Jesus was healed. Jesus didn't heal people and then accept them because they were well; He accepted them when they were sick. And for some that meant that they were healed and for others it didn't. But that wasn't what they needed most. What they needed was life, a life that came through being loved, feeling secure. It is the fear of people who are different in whatever way that is the source of all the anti-Semitism, all the racism, all of the problems that we have between people. When Jesus Christ's risen life is lived out in us, that fear is gone. Then the person who is different becomes for us, precisely because of that difference, a surprise for us which we gladly accept.

To sum it all up, Jesus' resurrection tells us that there is a real future and that we can depend on it. It also tells us that we must have a passion for life and never allow ourselves to become accustomed to death, to sin. Wherever death, sin and suffering manifest itself, we ought to resist it.

Finally, the resurrection reminds us that if we are to find our lives, we must lose them. To open up to other people who are friendless and different and to love those who do not affirm us in our habits and thinking is to create the kind of friendship, fellowship and love that characterizes the people who have risen with Christ. If we love life and people passionately, we are ready to die.

Peter puts it very well when he says,

God raised him from the dead and gave him unimaginable splendor, so that all your faith and

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hope might be centered in God. Now that you have, by obeying the truth, made your souls clean enough for a genuine love of your fellows, see that you do love one another, fervently and from the heart. For you are sons of God now; the live, permanent Word of the living God has given you his own indestructible heredity (1 Peter 1:21, 22, Phillips).