

THE POWER OF THE RESURRECTION

Scripture Reading: Philippians 3:7-14, RSV

Geothermal heat erupting through the surface. In that heat is life and energy but when I saw the fury of Mount St. Helens, the lightening, the spoke, I also knew that there was the power of death in the power of the volcano. There is the power of the ocean. Even as our toes press into the moist sand along the shore and feel the foamy waves, we see the broken timber, we see the ocean-front houses smashed by hurricane wind and ocean, and we sense that the power of death is in the power of the ocean. There is the power of the sun—93 million miles away. It sends heat and light to marry earth and water to produce azaleas, geraniums and lilies. But there is the power of death in the power of the sun. The ground is parched in the Sahel. Ethiopian grain is baked and burned. People starve and those who are caught in the desert cannot escape from the omnipresent scorching of the sun.

There is the power of the human personality—a Mother Teresa inspiring millions to selfless devotion, a Martin Luther King, a Helen Keller, a Fanny Crosby—life in that power. But there is also the power of death in the human personality—the Adolf Hitters, the Jim Joneses, the Charles Mansons. There is the power of life in genes and chromosomes—two cells becoming a many-billion celled person. But there is the power of death in the power of those cells for at some point in all of our lives the process of aging begins.

The power of death is everywhere in everything and it threatens everyone. Even in the most beautiful garden, even in the things that ordinarily are assumed to give life, there is the power of death. The floral arrangement that decorates the church today symbolizes the garden in which Jesus' tomb was located and where his body was laid. Even in that garden on the Sabbath after his crucifixion there was the stench of his own death.

Death is so powerful in the world that the apostle Paul, in trying to describe how much of God's energy was required to raise Jesus from the dead, uses the four Greek words for power. They all have a little different nuance but that is how much power it took to raise Jesus from the dead—all the power that God had at his command. That power means that while there are cycles of death and life in nature, while life and death seem always to exist, side by side in human existence, with Jesus' life and resurrection there is no death whatsoever in it. It is not like the sun which can give life and kill. It is not like water which can give life and kill. The resurrection of Jesus gives life and there is no death in it. The evidence that that life still exists is in our Scripture Reading from Philippians. Paul is telling us that the power of the resurrection is exhibited in us. (Please read the text before going on with this transcript.)

The resurrection life of Jesus in the church means that instead of dwelling on the past and on our weaknesses and our sins, instead of feeling guilty because of what has happened to us, we can now claim his victory over sin and over death for ourselves and live lives of gratefulness and joy. The power of the resurrection is in the church. We are told in Colossians, "We have been raised together with Christ." In Ephesians we are told that even when we were dead through our trespasses we have been made alive together with Christ. Paul tells us in Romans that as Christ was raised from the dead, we also should "walk in newness of life."

The indisputable proof of the resurrection will come when all of us who have been laid to rest, waiting

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for Christ, are resurrected from the dead. The single great characteristic of the church as living the resurrection life as God's people is hope. There is not much reason in the world to hope. The God is dead theology was in reality a statement that hope has gone. The poet Jean Paul wrote about a nightmare vision in which Jesus comes in the Last Judgment and speaks to the world. He proclaims "There is no God. I was mistaken. Everything is only stark, staring nothing the death rigour of infinity. Eternity lies in chaos." (Quoted in Jurgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*, p. 168.)

No more hopeless picture could be painted than Jesus himself telling us that there is no hope. Jesus' resurrection, therefore, must not be understood as merely the coming back to life of a dead body. It was far more than that. The power of the resurrection is not just that death has been conquered but that the deadliness of life has been conquered—the despair, the hopelessness, the fear, the anxiety, the suffering. The hope in the resurrection does' not, however, make us naïve. We do not pretend that we are in a world of bliss. In fact because we believe in the resurrection we become impatient with the world as it is. "Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, Jurgen Moltmann says, "but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world for the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present."

Christina Rosetti once said, "I cannot possibly use the word happy without meaning something beyond this present life." She suffered much during her lifetime. Because she was so deeply religious she suffered over the fact she would not marry the man she loved because he did not share her religious beliefs. She suffered over Graves Disease, the enlargement of the thyroid. She suffered with cancer. She never could be content-with now. Her poetry is filled with her longing for the future and her melancholy over the present. In her poem, "A Better Resurrection," these sentiments are beautifully expressed:

I have no wit, no words, no tears;
My heart within me like a stone
Is numbed too much for hopes or fears.
Look right, look left, I dwell alone;
I lift mine eyes, but dimmed with grief
No everlasting hills I see;
My life is in the falling leaf;
O Jesus, quicken me!

My life is like a faded leaf,
My harvest dwindled to a husk;
Truly my life is void and brief
And tedious in the barren dusk;
My life is like a frozen thing,
No bud nor greenness can I see;
Yet rise it shall—the sap of Spring;
O Jesus, rise in me!

My life is like a broken bowl,
A broken bowl that cannot hold
One drop of water for my soul

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Or cordial in the searching cold;
Cast in the fire the perished thing;
Melt and remould it, till it be
A royal cup for Him, my King:
O Jesus, drink of me!

Tomorrow we will bury our mothers. Next week we will dedicate our children. Death—life—death—life, until the resurrection. Jesus is the first-fruit, the guarantee that all who believe in him will be there:

Some of us old and wrinkled and weak;
Some of us young and strong;
Some of us broken and paralyzed in body;
Some of us Olympic gold medalists;
Some of us black and some of us white;
Some of us poor, some of us rich;
Some of us obscure and some of us well known.

It does not matter. It makes no difference. Jesus is our first-fruits. The power of his resurrection embraces us all.