

A Resurrected People
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Rincon Congregational Church
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*Because in this marathon of hope,
there are always replacements
to carry on in strength until we reach that goal
beyond death...
Be with us in this vigil
and you'll learn what it means to dream
and you'll know then
how wonderful it is
to live threatened with Resurrection!
To dream, awake
to watch, asleep
to live, dying
and to know yourself already
Risen!*

—Julia Esquivel

Reading: Matthew 28:1-20

Last words are often great indicators about people. The great playwright, Oscar Wilde, died of cerebral meningitis in a hotel in Paris. He was offered and accepted a drink of champagne, remarking as he did so, “I am dying beyond my means.” Still another version of Wilde’s last words has him staring at his shabby Paris bedroom. He is reputed to have said, “Either that wallpaper goes, or I do.”

When Gertrude Stein was dying of cancer, she turned to Alice Toklas and murmured, “What is the answer?” Miss Toklas made no reply. Miss Stein nodded and went on, “In that case, what is the question?”

Our passage today says, “Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week...” It was Sunday morning, first day of the week, when the reality of the past week’s tragedy had begun to sink in. While it was still quite dark, the two women walked toward the cemetery. The last time that they stood before the tomb was last Friday, when they had laid to rest their friend and teacher, Jesus.

These women, like everyone else, had hoped that Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel. They had hoped that Jesus would take charge, kick out the occupying Romans, and set things right. They had hoped. Now, there was not hope as they stood in the cold dark morning of this place of death.

Perhaps they were remembering what Jesus had said to them. According to John, Jesus’ last words were “I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. Yet a little while, and

the world will see me no more, but you will see me.” (John 14:18-19) This is the last promise, according to John: I will come to you.

Well, anyway, as the story goes, the women stood there. Then, the earth shook, the heavens opened, the stone rolled away from the opening of the tomb. And angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; for he has risen, as he said... He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.” (Matthew 28:5-7)

The women were tripping over themselves with fear and joy as they ran to tell the disciples. And then, the image of Jesus appeared to them on the way, and they “took hold of his feet and worshiped him.” Once again we encounter that promise. Jesus said, “Tell them to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.” They will *see me*. You will *see me*.

This was their hope—to continue somehow to see Jesus, to experience his message as true and to feel the power of that message still at work.

I heard a story about four year old Zachary who was in church with his mother. When hearing the preacher, during the Sunday morning sermon say, “Jesus, having risen from the dead...,” Zachary leaned over to his mom and whispered, “What does he mean?” She whispered that he was talking about how after Jesus died and was buried, he rose from the grave and was alive.” Zachary’s eyes got big and he said incredulously and in a loud voice, “JESUS WAS A ZOMBIE!?”

Knowing *about* the resurrection does not necessarily mean knowing *what* the resurrection *means*. Because, you see, the resurrection is not just a first century science fiction story. *It’s not so much an external event as an internal experience.*

One thing we can say about Jesus is that he had this profound awareness of God. And it was this awareness that led him to challenge injustice, to live with compassion toward others, to be filled with inner calm and happiness.

His life had a “raised up” quality. He was awake. He was truly alive. One can say that Jesus was raised up *long before* Easter. He was resurrected *before* he died. And what Jesus was about was this: He said, you, too, can be awakened. You, too, can be raised up, resurrected, alive. The reign of God is right under your nose, he said, and you can live in it. You, too, can know true happiness, peace and freedom.

The New Testament talks not just about one, single resurrection, but many resurrections. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul talked about how all the followers of Jesus are resurrected and “raised with Christ.” He wrote,

God, who is rich in mercy, out of great love...made us alive together with Christ...and raised us up with him.

Paul talked about believers as those who were dead and have been awakened to life, awakened by the presence of God within them.

The same power that raised Jesus—giving him new life, freedom and joy—is able to raise all people. And so in this sense we are raised with Jesus. In the last verse in Matthew, Jesus says, “Remember, I *am with you* always, to the end of the age.” In other words, when we experience the same life-giving presence of God as Jesus did, his spirit is with us.

Resurrection is a mysterious, ever-unfolding process in the lives of each generation. It is something we *experience* in the *here* and *now*.

One Easter morning there was a young mother who had lost her son, Barry, just six months before to cancer. Only the presence of her husband and small daughter kept her in the pew, enduring the Hallelujahs.

Later, someone from the hospital handed her a painting. “It’s Barry’s,” she said.

The picture showed a lake with people on opposite shores. Three waved from one side; on the other shore, above the head of a small boy in a red baseball cap, a cartoon balloon shouted, “Hi Mom, Dad, Betsy!”

And then she understood.

Jesus is present like a message from the past. Like a promise from the past, Jesus comes to us. “I will not leave you desolate. I will come to you.”

James Cone describes his life in a small southern town:

On Sunday morning, after spending six days of struggling to create meaning out of life, the people of Bearden would go to the church because the knew Jesus was going to be there...

Sister Ora Wallace would line out a familiar hymn... Immediately, the entire congregation would join her in singing because they felt the presence of Jesus...

When the pastor would say, “I know the Lord is in this place! Can I get a witness?” the people responded with shouts of praise saying, “Amen” and “Hallelujah.”

Through song, prayer and sermon the community affirmed Jesus’ presence...

How could black slaves know that they were human beings when they were treated like cattle? How could they know that they were somebody when everything in their environment said that they were nobody? How could they know that they had value that could not be defined in dollars and cents, when the symbol of the auction block was an ever-present reality? Only because they knew that Christ was present with them...

This is how the presence of Christ can resurrect us. In John Steinbeck's, *The Winter of Our Discontent*, the main character says,

Aunt Deborah read the Scripture to me like a daily newspaper and I suppose that's the way she thought of it, as something going on, happening eternally but always exciting and new. Every Easter, Jesus really rose from the dead, an explosion, expected but nonetheless new. It wasn't two thousand years ago to her; it was now.

Resurrection isn't just something that happened two thousand years ago. It is something continually going on, happening eternally but always exciting and new. "I will not leave you desolate. I will come to you."

In a speech I once heard Marian Wright Edelman, who was President of the Children's Defense Fund, tell a story. Jean Thomson was a good teacher. But when she met one of the boys in her new fifth grade class, Teddy Stollard, she didn't like him. She knew better—not to prematurely judge a child. But when she saw his unkempt appearance and uncaring attitude, she couldn't help but think that he was going to be a lot of trouble and that it was going to be a long year.

She looked back on Teddy's school record. In the first grade it said, "Poor home situation. Low achievement. Can do better." In the second grade it said, "Mother seriously ill. Can do better." In the third grade: "Mother died. Can do better." In the fourth grade: "His is too serious. Slow learner. Doesn't apply himself. Can do better."

And so here he was in the fifth grade with the attitude problem and lack of effort. Later that year came the class Christmas party, and all the children brought gifts for their teacher, each of them nicely wrapped. Except for Teddy. He came forward and gave his teacher, Jean Thompson, a wrinkled brown paper bag. All the children laughed when they saw it. In the bag were a bracelet and some perfume.

Afterwards he said to her, "Now you smell like my mother. That is *her bracelet* that I gave you..."

And she was changed! Their relationship and their lives were transformed in that moment.

Years later she received a letter from Teddy saying that he was graduating from high school, with honors, and that he owed her his thanks for helping to turn around. "I couldn't have done it without you," he said.

Years later she received another letter from Teddy saying that he was graduating at the head of his class from the university.

Still many years after that she received another letter. “I am now Dr. Theodore Stollard. I now have my M.D. and will be married in the fall. My father has died, and *I want you to come sit where my mother would have sat.*”

“I will not leave you desolate. I will come to you.”

And you know, Jesus *does* come to us—in moments of grace and beauty and love.

In the words of the poet, Rumi,

*Jesus is here,
and he wants to resurrect somebody!*