

RESURRECTION DAY
An Easter Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
April 8, 2012

Happy Easter to each and every one of you! Happy Resurrection Day. This is the great holiday of the Christian calendar – much greater than Christmas. Christmas is about the birth of a baby, but this is the story of the death and resurrection of a 33 year old man -- the story that began a new religion, Christianity, which has become the largest religion in the world. It was pretty unlikely when this Aramaic-speaking peasant from a marginalized village in the hinterlands of the Galilee region of Israel showed up in Jerusalem one year at the time of the Passover, crowds began shouting that he was the King of the Jews,ⁱ he violently disrupted activities in the great sacred temple,ⁱⁱ and he was arrested and executedⁱⁱⁱ (after one of his twelve disciples betrayed him,^{iv} another denied him,^v and others then began hightailing it back up to Galilee^{vi}).

But the story in this morning's gospel lesson from John^{vii} is that one of his female followers, one whom St. Augustine called the apostle to the apostles for being the first witness to his resurrection,^{viii} discovers that he isn't dead after all. Mary Magdalene initially finds that his tomb is empty and then realizes that one whom she thinks is the gardener is actually the resurrected Jesus. He speaks to her and tells her to go tell the male disciples that she has seen Jesus alive again. And so we began our service singing that "Jesus Christ is Risen Today;"^{ix} this is Resurrection Day.

What does "resurrection" really mean, though? It's a concept that first appears in the Bible in the book of Daniel more than 150 years before Jesus is born, with the claim that a time

will come when many people who are dead and buried shall awake to everlasting life.^x New Testament texts attributed to Jesus's apostles Peter and Paul in the second half of the first century A.D. make clear, though, that we can be spiritually resurrected in our current life here on earth: God has given Christians "a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead," according to the First Letter of Peter.^{xi} Paul explains that "just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life [here and now]."^{xii} We can be spiritually resurrected in our present lives. The gospel writer John also quotes Jesus as telling the Pharisee leader Nicodemus that one can and should be born again in one's earthly life, not physically but spiritually.^{xiii}

I don't get too caught up in speculation myself about whether Jesus' resurrection after his execution was a bodily, photographable event, or simply a series of visions or dreams that his disciples had after his death, making them feel that Jesus was still very much present in their lives. Certainly his disciples' sense that he was alive again for them was very strong, and against the odds, given his humiliating torture and death on a cross, with a crown of thorns on his head^{xiv} and an inscription above his head saying "This is the King of the Jews."^{xv} More important for me today, though, are the ways, as Paul and Peter and John suggested, that we can have experiences of personal resurrection in our own current lives here on earth – the ways that we can come to walk in newness of life ourselves now.

John Gardner, Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, civic leader, double Stanford degree holder, professor and long-time board of trustees member, who died in his home on campus ten years ago,^{xvi} gave a speech on "Personal Renewal" in 1990.^{xvii} He explained some of the metaphorical but very real crucifixions that we can experience in our lives: major wounds to our confidence or self-esteem, immobilizing resentments, defeats in our personal and work lives.

We can also be deeply debilitated by beginning to fail physically, facing much tougher problems than we can solve, becoming bored and trapped attitudinally, or just running down like an unwound clock. Some ways he describes what I'd call personal resurrection are learning the arts of mutual dependence, meeting the needs of loved ones and letting yourself need them, nurturing simplicity, and learning some critical life lessons, like: The world loves talent, but pays off on character. Most people are neither for you nor against you, they are thinking about themselves. No matter how hard you try to please, some people in this world are not going to love you.

John Gardner's central message for personal resurrection is to stay focused on discovering real meaning in life. This requires motivation to pursue the kinds of values that you're willing to sacrifice your life for, getting beyond the prison of self-preoccupation to concentrate on others, and maintaining a tough-minded optimism and belief in the future. He gives as an example a 53-year-old man who for most of his adult life was in a losing struggle against debt and misfortune. He had lost the use of his left arm in a battlefield injury during his military service. He'd been a prisoner of war for five years. Then he'd held two government jobs but failed at both. Finally he was imprisoned. Things looked very bleak for him. In effect he felt crucified. But in prison he decided to write a book with an optimistic belief in the future and an emphasis on character. It turned out to be one of the greatest books ever written. The resurrected prisoner was Cervantes and his book was *Don Quixote*.

Gardner also writes about Winston Churchill, who had a successful early life as a war correspondent, Member of Parliament, and First Lord of the Admiralty. But by his early forties he'd been discredited, and his life for the next twenty-five years was at best erratic and generally on a downward slide. It wasn't until the age of 66 that he found personal resurrection when he was elected prime minister during World War II and then again in the first half of the 1950's.

During his fallow years, Churchill, like Cervantes, also turned to writing, and to painting, helping him fend off depression. Then, near the end of his life he won the Nobel Prize for literature.^{xviii}

Jesus taught that we must lose our lives within our daily existence in order to gain true fulfillment.^{xix} He asked his followers to take up their cross daily and follow him,^{xx} because material gain in life cannot hold a candle to living a committed life beyond oneself. He implored his followers not to worry about what they would eat or drink or wear, for isn't "life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" "Strive first for ... righteousness," he taught, "and all these things will be given to you as well."^{xxi}

Our Resurrection Day can be viewed from a much wider scope than just the narrowly personal, though. There's something much larger going on here – not just as a matter of Christian theology, but also as a force of nature and as a wider archetypal reality. The very first sermon I delivered, almost 40 years ago now, was on Easter,^{xxii} and I explained that it's named for the Anglo-Saxon goddess of the dawn, Eostre, a fertility deity. Easter eggs are not only related to fertility but also to mythological accounts of the creation of the world in Babylonia, Egypt, and India. In ancient Egypt, for example, it was believed that the male earth deity, Geb, and the female sky deity, Nut produce a great egg from which the whole universe proceeds. A phoenix, symbol of the sun, is the first thing to emerge from this egg. It dies by setting fire to its own nest and burning itself to ashes. But another egg is found in the ashes, from which the phoenix hatches and arises again. It's all cyclical, as nature itself is cyclical. The sun seems to die each day in a blaze of flame at sunset, only to arise into life again at dawn of the following day. The seasons come and the seasons go. The date of Easter is timed from the vernal equinox, the beginning of spring – the time of sowing of crops and emergence of life again after the gray

death of winter. A central theme of many spring festivals is that the creative life germ, like a caterpillar entering its cocoon, must be imprisoned or entombed before it can reach its true potentiality. Easter is linked to the Jewish Passover and the Israelites release from captivity in the Exodus from Egypt. Jesus' Last Supper was likely a Passover Seder, and he then became titled the Lamb of God, the Passover or paschal lamb that is sacrificed for the greater good of all.^{xxiii}

As we celebrate our Resurrection Day here at Stanford, we are linked to archetypal traditions of renewal from all over the world and from time immemorial. All of us have had the experience of dying to ourselves in intense love for another or in an important cause, only to find our lives returned to us infinitely more fulfilled. Our Christian story of Resurrection Day is in continuity with many other religions' and cultures' stories and symbols and rituals and traditions – and in natural events like the rising of the sun at dawn and rebirth in the spring. It's not just coincidence that Jesus is reported to have arisen from the dead with the sun at dawn at the beginning of the spring. Let us arise in our own ways now and celebrate the triumph of the life force in the universe.

BENEDICTION

God of Easter and infrequent Spring, announce the covenant to deceitful lands.

Drive the sweet liquor through our parched veins; lure us to fresh schemes of life.

Rouse us from tiredness and self-pity. Whet us for use.

Fire us with good passion. Restore in us the love of living. Bind us to hope again.

Clarke Dewey Wells

NOTES

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- ⁱ Mark 11: 1-10; Matthew 21:1-10; Luke 19: 28-40; John 12:12-19; See also: Mark 15:26; Matthew 27:37; Luke 23:38; John 19:2-16..
- ⁱⁱ Mark 11:15-18; Matthew 21:12-13; Luke 19:45-46; Compare John 2: 13-16.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Mark 14:43-15:41; Matthew 26:47-27:56; Luke 22:47-23:49; John 18:1-19:37.
- ^{iv} Mark 14:10-11, 43-46; Matthew 26:14-16, 47-50; Luke 22:3-6, 47-48; John 18:2-5.
- ^v Mark 14:66-72; Matthew 26:69-75; Luke 22:55-62; John 18:25-27.
- ^{vi} Matthew 28:16; Luke 24:13-24.
- ^{vii} John 20:1-18.
- ^{viii} Saint Mary Magdalene, "The Apostle to the Apostles," *The Nazarene Way of Essenic Studies*, www.thenazareneway.com/mary_magdalene.htm
- ^{ix} Charles Wesley, "Jesus Christ is Risen Today" (1747).
- ^x *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 39; See Daniel 12:2.
- ^{xi} 1 Peter 1:3.
- ^{xii} Romans 6:4; See also Colossians 2:12-14, although this may not be a genuine Pauline epistle
- ^{xiii} See John 3:1-10.
- ^{xiv} Mark 15:17; Matthew 27:29; John 19:2.
- ^{xv} Luke 23:38; see also Matthew 27:37; Mark 15:26, John 19:19.
- ^{xvi} "Renowned Social Reformer John Gardner dies at 89," *Stanford Report* (February 20, 2002)
- ^{xvii} John Gardner, "Personal Renewal" (November 10, 1990), www.pbs.org/johngardner/selections/writings_speech_1.html
- ^{xviii} Additional details from William ReesMogg, "Portrait of the Artist with His Black Dog," *The Times* of London (May 22, 2007).
- ^{xix} Mark 8:35; Matthew 10:39, 16:25; Luke 9:24, 17:33; John 12:25.
- ^{xx} Luke 9:23.
- ^{xxi} Matthew 6:25,33.
- ^{xxii} Scotty McLennan, "Why Celebrate Easter?" (A sermon delivered at the First Congregational Unitarian Church of Harvard, Massachusetts on April 22, 1973).
- ^{xxiii} 1 Corinthians 5:7.