

"He Has Been Raised"
An Easter Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan

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"Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised." What great news! It amazed and awed the two Marys and Salome at the empty tomb almost two thousand years ago. It can mean amazement and awe for us right here today, if our hearts are open. We desperately need some good news. We've seen and heard too much lately about terror and war, about a failing economy and increasing unemployment, at home and around the world. Yet, the resurrection is real, and it's here and now, on Easter Day 2003, just as much as it was on that early morning in the first century.

Or have our hearts grown too cold? Are we stuck at the crucifixion on Good Friday, unable to move to the Alleluia of Easter? Or does the whole biblical story just seem too remote and too unbelievable for us moderns? Perhaps the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay got it right when she poetically asked if it was for this that Jesus bled upon the bitter tree:

The merry bells ring out, the people kneel;
Up goes the preacher before the crowd;
With voice of honey and with eyes of steel
Droning your humble gospel to the proud.
Nobody listens. Less than the wind that blows
Are all your words to us you died to save.
O Prince of Peace! O Sharon's dewy rose!
How mute you lie within your vaulted grave.
The stone the angel rolled away with tears
Is back upon your mouth these thousand years.

But then there might be this plea, as an antidote, from a great cynical bear of a man I used to know, named Clarke Dewey Wells:

God of Easter and infrequent Spring:
Announce the large covenant to deceitful lands,
Drive the sweet liquor through our parched veins,
Lure us to fresh schemes of life.
Rouse us from tiredness, self-pity,
Whet us for use,
Fire us with good passion.
Restore in us the love of living,
Bind us to fear and hope again.

Easter is the great holiday of Christianity. Theologically, Christmas doesn't hold a candle to Easter. Easter affirms that a first century teacher and healer and prophet named Jesus, who was betrayed and abused and died horribly, rose to live again and to become Lord and Savior. This is the central message of Christianity. This is the story which spread through the ancient Middle East like wildfire, eventually transforming the whole Roman empire which had ruled the Israel of Jesus' time; by our day, Christianity has become the largest religion in the world. Easter is absolutely central to Christianity. "He has been raised" is the foundational affirmation of the New Testament.ⁱ It would not have been enough that there was yet another teacher and healer and prophet running around Israel 2000 years ago, named Jesus of Nazareth. The good news, the important news, the transformational news, which spawned a whole new religion, is the news of Jesus' resurrection.

As many of you know, I'm a committed Christian, but I'm not a Christian triumphalist or exclusivist. I take Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and I endeavor to follow in his footsteps, but I believe that there are other paths than Christianity that go to the top of the spiritual mountain, with names like Judaism and Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. I'm also a liberal Christian, who doesn't believe that Jesus' resurrection was a photographable event. I think some of Edna St. Vincent Millay's modern people have been lost to Christianity over a literalist view of the resurrection, so I want to say something about that, before returning to an exhortation to awe and amazement on this Easter Day.

As I read the gospel accounts, informed by biblical scholars like Marcus Borg,ⁱⁱ Jesus was resurrected on Easter, not resuscitated. This was not a matter of a dead person, like Lazarus,ⁱⁱⁱ coming back to his prior life of eating, drinking, and sleeping, only to die again someday as Lazarus undoubtedly did. Instead, by resurrection, Jesus was transformed to an entirely different level of being, beyond the usual categories of life and death. As various New Testament passages describe, before Jesus ascended to sit on the right hand of his Father,^{iv} he appeared and disappeared at will,^v walked through solid objects like locked doors,^{vi} and could be heard by one person and not by others in the same place.^{vii} When Jesus himself had been asked to describe resurrection earlier in the Gospel of Mark, he said that those who rise from the dead in this way are no longer normal human beings, but become like angels in heaven.^{viii}

All of this still may not make sense to many modern people -- perhaps to many of you here today. Yet, let's look at it the other way around, from the perspective of Jesus' followers. A lot of them reported seeing the resurrected Jesus, even if they may not have recognized him at first. Mary Magdalene saw him outside the tomb after first mistaking him for the gardener.^{ix} Two other followers met him later the same day on the road to Emmaus. They spent the day walking and talking with him, but they didn't recognize him until he broke bread at dinner with them that night, whereupon Jesus immediately vanished from their sight.^x Likewise, Jesus appeared to Peter, to James, to all of his original disciples together, to five hundred other followers at one time, and to Paul on the road to Damascus.^{xi} The experience of the early Christian community, including martyrs like Stephen,^{xii} was that the resurrected Jesus manifested himself to them, and it made all the difference in the world. Of course, that's been true for many Christians throughout history, up to the present time. Jesus lives, as it's often said, and lots of people report having had a personal experience with Jesus. I'll never forget how vividly my mother once described having encountered Jesus, first sensing his presence fill the room and then

feeling his hand on her shoulder, when she was praying intensely one evening at home. That experience provided sustenance for the rest of her life.

So, it seems to me that these are all visions or epiphanies or revelations of Jesus, not meetings with a resuscitated corpse. They are mystical experiences. They are not photographable or recordable events, except as described later by those who have experienced the risen Jesus. Yet, none of this is to say that these experiences are any less real, or powerful, or life-changing than meeting a physical, flesh-and-blood person. In fact they more be much more intense and transformational. And they lie at the heart of Christianity -- how it began, how it has been sustained, and how it informs the future. That's as true for those of us who haven't had strong mystical experiences with Jesus as those who have, because most of us have had at least hints of some kind of mystical experience in life, often out in nature; we know that the great religious exemplars have almost always had profound mystical lives; we can aspire to greater awareness of this sort in our own futures. The paradigm is that Spirit-filled person who walked this earth for 33 years, teaching so wisely, healing so effectively, and challenging the worldly powers of his day so dramatically, who has been raised to eternal life, and who continues to influence us so deeply in so many ways. The Easter story is foundational to Christian understanding and Christian action. It is critical that Jesus has been raised and has been experienced as raised. Jesus lives. Jesus is Lord. Jesus saves.

Now, once resurrection becomes central to one's worldview, death can no longer be the final answer, either after our physical deaths or in our daily lives. Jesus teaches instead that the final answer is love -- infinite and eternal love. He teaches that on the cross when he says "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."^{xiii} He teaches that after his resurrection when he appears to his followers and says "Peace be with you."^{xiv} He teaches that during his life by inspiring people not only to love their neighbor as themselves^{xv} but also to love their enemies.^{xvi} Love is utterly transforming. As the apostle Paul says, "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."^{xvii} The apostle John puts it in ultimate terms: "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."^{xviii}

The Easter story presents God, through Jesus on the cross, as experiencing human suffering at its most imaginably intense. So no matter how bad conditions are of unemployment, of war, of terror...of personal pain, and grief, and mourning -- no matter how bad they may get -- the Easter message is first that God's love is so great that God completely understands and that God experiences our suffering with us. God remains at our side, as close as the closest friend or lover could be. God accepts us unconditionally and accompanies us no matter what and no matter where. Then, the rest of the Easter message is that utter transformation is possible on the far side of that suffering, not just in the world to come but often in this earthly existence as well. Jesus heals continually in his earthly ministry, dramatically altering the course of peoples' lives,^{xix} and his disciples later do the same.^{xx} Also, our loving God, rather than worldly wealth, can ease anxiety dramatically, Jesus teaches. Then, like lilies of the field we do not have to constantly worry about the material details of our lives -- what we will drink, and what we will eat, and what we will wear. Striving first for righteousness will mean that necessities will be provided in ways we can't now predict or control.

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A minister I know used to visit a drug dealer in prison every week for a year -- a teenager who was also a thief and a liar. As the minister described it in writing, "We talked about prison, parents, children; We talked about Darwin, Newton, Einstein; We talked about life, love, hope and truth. We were never aware of the HOLY in our midst." Then, "During the final month of prison, [this convict] enrolled as a special student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. After his...release, he became a full-time student in chemistry." The minister finished the story and summed it up this way: "When he graduated with honors from MIT, I was thanked by his father, by his mother, and by Gene, himself. It was pleasant to receive the accolades. But how the stone had been moved from the cave's entrance -- was impossible to tell. A resurrection is always a mystery -- though it happens every day."^{xxii}

All this minister did was to express his love in action. The transformation for the drug dealer appears to have been love received and appreciated. They were not aware of the HOLY in their midst, and how the stone had been moved was impossible to tell. But it was a resurrection, and it happens every day if our hearts are open. May we leave this place on this Easter Day open to amazement, to awe, and to love -- freely given and freely received.

NOTES

ⁱ Marcus J. Borg, "The Truth of Easter," in Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright, The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 129.

ⁱⁱ See, for example, Borg and Wright, The Meaning of Jesus, especially chapter 8, "The Truth of Easter."

ⁱⁱⁱ John 11: 1-44.

^{iv} Mark 16: 19.

^v Luke 24: 15, 31.

^{vi} John 20:19

^{vii} Acts 22: 6-11.

^{viii} Mark 12: 25.

^{ix} John 20:11-18.

^x John 24:13-31.

^{xi} I Corinthians 15: 5-8.

^{xii} Acts 7:55-56.

^{xiii} Luke 23: 34.

^{xiv} Luke 24: 36; John 20: 21, 26.

^{xv} See Matthew 22: 34-40 and Luke 10: 25-28

^{xvi} Matthew 5: 44.

^{xvii} I Corinthians 13: 7.

^{xviii} I John 4: 16.

^{xix} See for example, Luke 5: 17-26.

^{xx} See, for example, Acts 3: 1-10.

^{xxi} Matthew 6: 24-34; Luke 12: 22-31.

^{xxii} David O. Rankin, Portraits From the Cross, (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1978), p. 17.