

“Resurrection Always Happens”

Mark 16.1–8

The Rev. Hal Chorpenning,

Plymouth Congregational UCC, Easter 2003

It’s the \$64,000 question for many Christians, isn’t it: “Did the resurrection really happen?” For some of us, it’s probably not a question at all: we think of the resurrection as being Jesus’ body brought back to life, eating breakfast with the disciples on the beach, having Thomas poking his fingers into holes in Jesus’ hands. My guess is that there are others of you who wonder whether the resurrection is more along the lines that Paul describes: as being a spiritual, rather than a bodily resurrection. And there are likely to be people in our congregation who say that the resurrection is a really nice myth that describes the way Jesus’ message and teaching triumphs over worldly power, even the power of the Roman Empire that crucified him.

To each of these ways of looking at resurrection, I say, “Yes!” Each of these is a way to look at the experience of Easter through a different lens. It is not as if the biblical record is unambiguous. Some stories tell of Jesus with some sort of physical body, others tell of Jesus’ metaphysical presence, and others tell only of an empty tomb. **What they all say is that death is never God’s final word, either for Jesus or for us.**

Here is what Mark’s gospel, the earliest of the four canonical gospels has to say: “He has been raised. . . . He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him just as he told you.” That’s the end of Mark’s gospel. Some versions of the Bible add several verses to the end of this chapter, which detail resurrection appearances, commissioning the disciples, and Jesus’ ascension into heaven. But the earliest manuscripts (and many modern Bibles) omit these additional endings as being inauthentic.

So, if all we’re left with is that Jesus has been raised and is en route to Galilee, it doesn’t give us very much to go on: just an empty tomb and some kind of appearance yet to come.

So, what does resurrection mean?

The Rev. Canon N.T. Wright, a noted British New Testament theologian, sees the resurrection in very physical terms: “The early church did not behave as though they had simply a new sort of religious experience. . . . They did not behave as if their former leader was. . . a spirit or a soul in God’s hand. . . . The only explanation for their behavior, and their stories, and their symbols, and their theology, is that they really believed that Jesus had been re-embodied, had been bodily raised from the dead.”¹

Well, maybe. . . maybe not. Some people think that it means resuscitation. But there **isn’t** solid biblical evidence for that. Luke Timothy Johnson, one of the major critics of the progressive Jesus Seminar, writes, “The resurrection is **not** a claim that Jesus was resuscitated, that he resumed his former life after a ‘clinical death’ experience.”² So, if this supposition is correct, it isn’t the same sort of miracle as Jesus’ raising Lazarus from the dead.

The great 20th-century Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner wrote, “If we were to orient ourselves. . . to the idea of reviving a physical-material body, then we would, *a priori*, miss

¹ N.T. Wright in a lecture at Union-PSCE

² Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, p. 134.

not only the general sense of ‘resurrection,’ but also that of the resurrection of Christ.”³ So for some, resurrection doesn’t mean reviving a corpse.

So, if resurrection isn’t resuscitation, what is it? Johnson asserts that “the Christian claim concerning the resurrection of Jesus is not that he picked up his old manner of life, but rather that after his death he entered into an entirely new form of existence, one in which he shared the power of God.”⁴

That’s pretty abstract, so let’s unpack it just a bit. In none of the gospel stories does Jesus go back home to live with his family. John records that he appeared to Mary Magdalene and then to the disciples when they were fishing, and Luke tells that wonderful story of Jesus meeting the two travelers on the road to Emmaus. But even in these brief encounters, Jesus isn’t really doing what he did in life: teaching, healing, and proclaiming the Kingdom of God. It’s harder to get our hands on this new form of existence, which involves sharing God’s power.

The earliest witness to the Easter event in our Bible is Paul the apostle, who wrote his letter to the Church in Corinth around 54 A.D. Paul writes that Jesus “was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.”⁵ Life, says Paul, “is sown in a physical body, it is raised in a spiritual body.”⁶ So, Paul seems to affirm the idea that the empty tomb doesn’t mean physical resurrection, but Paul certainly had a visceral encounter with the spirit of the risen Christ as he walked toward Damascus.

Interestingly, though the creeds of the fourth century, both the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed speak of the “resurrection of the body,” in seeming contradiction of Paul’s interpretation.

Listen to the way Paul’s experience fits into this idea: “Easter need not involve the claim that God supernaturally intervened to raise the corpse of Jesus from the tomb,” writes Marcus Borg. “Rather, the core meaning of Easter is that Jesus continued to be experienced after his death, but in a radically new way: as a **spiritual and divine reality**. He was known in non-ordinary experiences, as well as in the community’s life together. The truth of Easter is grounded in such experiences of the risen Christ as a **living presence**, not in the physically observable events restricted to a particular day or few days in the first century.”⁷

There is also an important quality of mystery that I think needs to be acknowledged around the resurrection. If it was cut-and-dried and scientifically verifiable, the gospel writers would have recounted it that way. But that doesn’t leave much room for faith or wonder or for possibility.

So, how many of you have witnessed a resurrection? Seriously, has anyone here witnessed a resurrection? Actually, I’d imagine that most of you have, and you might not have recognized it as such.

Do you think we have to wait until we die to be resurrected? I think not. What times in your life have represented a rebirth, a new lease on life, a sense of your old self having died and a new life having begun?

³ Karl Rahner, *Schriften zur Theologie*, p. 349.

⁴ Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

⁵ I Corinthians 15.4

⁶ I Corinthians 15.44

⁷ Marcus Borg, *The God We Never Knew*, p. 93.

I have seen people and families in the death-grip of addiction. Alcoholism and drug addiction create a bond that is life-giving to no one. And I have seen individuals and families recover from addiction, even those who had essentially been given up for dead. Recovery can be a form of resurrection, and it happens everyday!

Do you know any gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered persons who lived a life shrouded by the shadows of being in the closet, only to find that when they accepted their full humanity, they became almost like new people? Coming out can be a form of resurrection, and it happens everyday!

I'll bet that you've known someone who has lived a life that was incomplete, because they were living with what Blaise Pascal, the great mathematician, called a God-shaped vacuum their heart? It is a vacuum that can never be filled by any created thing, but only by God. You may even have had that experience yourself, of having been transformed by discovering a spiritual life you didn't know could exist. That, too, is a form of resurrection that happens everyday!

In almost every case, we have to give up something, to sacrifice something in order to become someone new. We each must go through Good Friday in order to get to Easter morning.

In some aspect of each of our lives is a chrysalis waiting to metamorphose into a butterfly. Is there a part of your life that is encased in the dry husks of a bulb, just waiting to be planted and to have a beautiful tulip spring up? What kind of transformation or rebirth or resurrection do you need in your life? It is probably something that you need God's help to accomplish.

We, each of us, need to open to the reality of resurrection in our *lives*, not simply in our deaths.

Returning to the grand metaphysical sense of resurrection, I have a sense that we will be brought into a new form of being after our bodies wither and perish. And at the same time, I don't rule out any possibility out of hand, because the limits of my own understanding do not, in fact, limit the way God operates in the world.

Our God is a God of possibilities...limitless possibilities. Ours is a God who acts in our lives. Did the resurrection really happen? The resurrection always happens!

As we gather at the communion table, may you sense the presence of the risen Christ in your heart and in our midst. Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Amen.