

Love Conquers Death Sunday, 4/4/21

Imagine that three days after attending the funeral and graveside service of a close friend, you return to the cemetery, early in the morning, to place flowers on the grave. What would you think if you found an empty grave with only a couple of shovels and a pile of dirt? Wouldn't you assume that some twisted person had dug up the casket and stolen it, body and all? The intersection of resurrection with reality is shocking. We're much more comfortable keeping it safely at a distance, tucked away with other matters of faith, believed but not seen. Yet one day, we will see it with our own eyes. Do you believe that?

The story goes that a man and his five-year old daughter were driving past a cemetery and noticed a large pile of dirt next to a freshly dug grave, when the little girl said, "Look, Daddy, one got out!" That's exactly right- one did get out. Because Jesus "got out" of the grave, we can believe that the deaths of the ones we love, and even our own deaths, are not the end of the story. Jesus, the way of love, was not defeated by death and neither will we be. **"He is risen! He is risen, indeed!"**

It's common to hear people, even pastors, talk about resurrection as if it was only a metaphor. Yes, there are many ways in which God raises us to new life every day, but let's remember that the tomb was empty. Jesus didn't leave any bones behind, and he didn't turn into a ghostly, disembodied spirit. He came back to life in a new resurrection body and even ate breakfast with the disciples. That means that we also will be raised from the dead, and given a new body, different and yet somehow still ours, made perfect through the powerful love of God.

As the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome: "Since we have been united with him in his death, we will also be raised to life as he was."¹ And similarly, Paul wrote, "The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you."² Jesus rose, and we, too, will rise- not just in Spirit, but in body as well! **"He is risen! He is risen, indeed!"**

¹ Romans 6:5. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

² Romans 8:11. Ibid.

Let's hear some more of the Easter story now, as we rejoin Jesus as he meets up, incognito, with two of his followers on the road to Emmaus. I'm continuing in Luke 24, verse 13, in the New Living Translation. {Read Luke 24:13-24, 28-32 NLT}

Some of the details in this encounter are rather revealing. Luke tells us that "sadness was written across their faces."³ Grief is a pretty normal response to loss and disappointment. But this was Easter, the fulfilment of all that God had promised and Jesus had predicted. Easter is the perfect realization and celebration of God's love. Jesus would soon be gone from them, but in going to be with the Father, Jesus would be more present to them than ever before through the Holy Spirit. But their eyes had not yet been opened, they still didn't understand, and so they were understandably sad.

How about you? What sadness is clouding your heart on this Easter Sunday and making it difficult to celebrate? Ask God's Holy Spirit to open your eyes to the presence of the risen Christ, that you might fully experience Jesus, the way of love.

The sadness of the men on the road didn't prevent them from walking with Jesus, both literally and figuratively. And when the time came at the end of the day for them to seek shelter and a meal, they did the loving thing, extending hospitality to Jesus, a stranger they met along the road. Note that they didn't just politely invite him because they were obligated to, they actually begged him to stay! That's radical hospitality. That's love. It warms my heart to read, because that is what Jesus, the way of love, would do, right? Here we find disciples of Jesus, burdened by shock and grief, weary from travel, and yet still acting in love toward a stranger on the road. Would we have done the same back then? Would we do the same today? If we're relying on our own strength, perhaps not, but by the resurrection power and love of God, all things are possible.

Their eyes were finally opened in the breaking of the bread, and at last they understood. In a short while, we too will break bread and share a cup. Are you ready to be surprised by the Holy Spirit, to have your eyes opened to the reality of God's love in a new way today? Are you ready to believe that love has conquered death? It can happen for you. Your heart can come alive again, just as the hearts of the disciples burned within them as

³ Luke 24:17. Ibid.

they walked with Jesus. The way of love is alive, and he wants you to live as well. “He is risen! **He is risen, indeed!**”

Whatever number of days and nights the Lord gives us in our present bodies, we know that those hours are sometimes filled with joy, sorrow, celebration, grief, accomplishment, failure, life, and death. We have a choice of how we live those twenty-four hours. We can live and love like we’re chilling out in the grave, or we can follow Jesus, the way of love, getting out of the cold ground and choosing to live in the here and now. We can live out our remaining days with our eyes closed or let God’s Spirit open them wide with the revelation of God’s resurrection love. We can watch as our bodies slowly betray us by age, decay, disease, and disability, or we can transcend the limits of these bodies and exercise our spiritual muscles, relying on the supernatural love of God to do the impossible. Which way would you rather spend your remaining days in this body? The love of God is a love so powerful that it transcends even death. The way of love that we follow is supernatural, and so as Easter people, we are called and equipped to love God and others supernaturally, choosing to live and love out loud. “He is risen! **He is risen, indeed!**”

Since we know that death will not hold us forever, that means we don’t have to be afraid of death. And since we no longer have to be afraid of death, we are free to live lives of joy and self-giving love, sharing the good news of repentance and forgiveness of sins to all people. That’s the good news of the resurrection. That was the good news of Easter two thousand years ago, and it’s still the good news for us today and tomorrow.

There’s so much strife and brokenness in our lives and in the world around us that it can overwhelm us and lead us to conclude that hope is either a thing of the past or a thing for foolish people. We’re living in the midst of broken pandemic responses, broken relationships, broken bodies, broken politics, and perhaps a broken economy. Can Easter speak to any of that?

The resurrection of Jesus, the way of love, reminds us that hope is not a thing of the past. Perhaps our problem has been that we’ve put our hope in the wrong things. Anything or any person other than Jesus is bound to disappoint us. But we can count on Jesus. Faith in the living Christ is what brings meaning to each day and offers us the hope of restoration and reconciliation of all that is broken.

It's not that Easter suddenly made everything easy or clear for the followers of Jesus. Easter still doesn't do that for us today. But Easter does radically change our orientation, giving us a new framework from which to see our struggles. Easter reminds us that God's love is trustworthy and strong, even when so many things we've put our trust in seem unreliable and weak. Easter reminds us that death and darkness do not get the final word, but rather life and light. Easter reminds us who this Jesus really is: The way of love, given selflessly so that we might be called the Children of God, living in the abundant love of God and sharing it freely to all who will receive it. "He is risen! **He is risen, indeed!**"

Last Easter, at the beginning of what has turned out to be more than a full year of pandemic, I closed with a prayer poem by Helen Steiner Rice, an American poet whose father died in the influenza epidemic of 1918, over a hundred years ago.⁴ Her poem seemed especially appropriate for that Easter morning, and I'm reprising it this year, because even though the suffering of this past year seems to have no end, Easter Sunday reminds us that each day we can find fresh hope in the resurrection:

God, give us eyes to see the beauty of the Spring,
And to behold Your majesty in every living thing -
And may we see in lacy leaves and every budding flower
The Hand that rules the universe with gentleness and power -
And may this Easter grandeur that Spring lavishly imparts
Awaken faded flowers of faith lying dormant in our hearts,
And give us ears to hear, dear God, the Springtime song of birds
With messages more meaningful than man's often empty words
Telling harried human beings who are lost in dark despair -
'Be like us and do not worry for God has you in His care.

That's my prayer for each of us today, that we might see through the eyes of faith, the beauty of the spring that God is bringing because of the enduring power of God's way of love.

Please take some time now to reflect on how you will continue walking the way of love, never letting go of the resurrection power of Easter.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Steiner_Rice



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