

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer

April 16, 2006

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“I Am the Resurrection and the Life”

John 11: 17-27

Imagine for a moment that space aliens are looking in on human activity from time to time. Surely they would have no difficulty understanding our fireworks displays of July 4th, for it would make sense to them that a nation would mark its independence. They could probably understand Thanksgiving, a holiday based on the theme of gratitude. They might could understand Christmas, for even if no one can produce a birth certificate substantiating that the world’s Savior was born on December 25, birthdays are celebrated every day. But the space aliens would be perplexed by this day, when millions of people are gathering around the world to celebrate an event that cannot be proved, an event that has no precedent or parallel. They would be more perplexed when we explained to them that Easter is not only a celebration of an event, but of a belief, our conviction that God not only raised Jesus Christ from the dead, but is generally a God of resurrection power. Indeed, at Easter we celebrate more than the resurrection of our Lord; we celebrate our own destiny; for we see our own future as inextricably united with the future of our Christ. At the heart of our faith is the promise of John 3:16, that whosoever believes in him will not perish but will enjoy everlasting life. Some among those space aliens, as some among our human species, might say that we can’t be right, that our hope is too good to be true, that it is only an infantile wish. But I offer a counter proposal: our trust in God’s resurrecting reality is a hope confirmed at every turn by our experience of life, by our experience of love, and by our experience of God.

The year was 1945, shortly after the war.

A young relief worker was sent to inventory a recently-vacated concentration camp, Maidenek.

What she found in that sinister, depressing place overwhelmed her,

not just the barbed-wire and crematorium chimneys,

but little things, like baby shoes, personal jewelry, the strands of women’s hair.

Yet amidst this excruciating horror this young woman found something astounding,

something she could have never anticipated.

Amidst graffiti-covered walls, amidst the sad legacy of numerous initials carved desperately into the bunks

and barracks, this young woman found, of all things, butterflies. Hundreds upon hundreds of butterflies!

Facing imminent, pitiless death, adults and children alike had left behind a final message of hope,

carving and drawing hundreds of butterflies to symbolize their expectation

that their lives would not end in this squalid place.

On the one hand she saw ample evidence of the Nazi death machine;

on the other hand she saw evidence of people’s courageous, resurrection hope;

she came to realize that resurrection hope is a constituent element of a healthy human personality.

The presence of butterflies in the face of imminent death caused this woman to become a psychiatrist who spent her career studying the human refusal to believe that death is the end of life.

You know her as Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, chronicler of death and near-death experiences.

She become convinced that resurrection hope is embedded in the healthy human psyche.

Perhaps many of you are like me: you have trouble visualizing heaven. I wonder, how will it be arranged? How will we know people we have known before? How will we know that we are we? I do not know. I do recall that the great theologian Karl Barth once said that the one thing he was sure of is that English would be spoken in heaven, because Americans were too lazy to learn another language! Yet, if I cannot envision heaven, I know the space aliens will shake their heads in wonder in realizing that virtually every human culture has intuited that death cannot be the end of life. Virtually every religious faith has posited the reality of some kind of life beyond life. I think this impulse is within the human psyche because God put it there. God has made us so. The fact that we hunger suggests that we are made for food; that we thirst says we are made to drink; that we are attracted to one another indicates that we are made for romance, for reproduction, for companionship. So, too, that we have a resurrection urge within us suggests that we are made for eternal communion with God. Such a hunger for the eternal is embedded within our psyche.

More than any other creatures on earth, we are most aware of our mortality, we are the most fully conscious of the fact that we will die. Yet we also, of all the creatures on earth, are the only ones who refuse to accept the finality of death. Why? I think it is because we are those creatures who most know what it means to love. As Paul put it, “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things – and – Love never ends!” As I look out on this congregation I see so many of you who have lost people so dear to you. Yet those of us who have lost loved ones know in the marrow of our bones that death may have ended the earthly existence of someone we love, but death hasn’t ended our love for them. Even in the face of their physical absence our heart still treasures them, still aches for the m. If we didn’t still love, we wouldn’t still grieve, but we do -- which is why the Bible says, “Love is stronger than death.” Love is stronger than death! Love never ends!

In fifteenth-century Italy it was a normal practice for artists to decorate the walls of cemetery chapels with paintings in which angels dramatically drew aside curtains to reveal a room beyond, beckoning the viewer to glimpse another world. These paintings were always done above the tombs of important people. Invariably, behind the curtains, having crossed the threshold into the world beyond, would be a depiction of the person or people buried in the tomb below. A notable exception was offered by the artist Piero Della Francesca. Above one tomb Francesca painted two angels dramatically pulling back the curtain to reveal a very earthy, very pregnant, peasant woman, her feet firmly planted in the soil – the Madonna, Mary, about to give birth to the Christ. Why did Francesca paint a masterpiece that broke from expected convention? Because beneath that marvelous painting of Mary lay the tomb of Piero Della Francesca’s own mother. Love compelled him to cast his eyes upon the birth of the Resurrection and the Life!

Resurrection hope is embedded in our psyche, it is implicit in our love, but most of all, *it is foundational to our experience of God.* Someone asked the celebrated journalist Malcolm Muggeridge to name the single most astounding event of the twentieth century. Naturally, many obvious choices lay before him – but this is what he said: “To me the most astounding event of the twentieth century was the Soviet Union’s inability to kill the Russian Christian church.” Muggeridge noted that for decades the Soviet Union had at its disposal every resource of terror, education, influence and persuasion, yet after decades of dedicated effort, it was the Soviet Union who died, while the Russian church is experiencing resurrection!

The only plausible explanation is that God is a resurrecting God.

Too often we treat the resurrection power of God as something secondary, ancillary to our theology, when in fact it is the very hub of our faith.

The resurrection power of God is implicit in the opening sentence of Genesis:
out of the lifeless void, God drew forth life!

The resurrection power of God is the hub out of which all other faith statements stem.

Paul was right: if our God is not a resurrecting God, then we are lying about the nature of the Creator of the universe.

Then none of our doctrines matter, none of our values matter, none of our lives matter, because our lives are wedded to that of Christ, who spent his entire career pointing to the God of resurrection.

If Christ's life ends in the tomb, then so does ours!

If Christ's pilgrimage is punctuated by death, then so is ours! Our future is wedded to his.

The integrity of our faith stands on the validity of Christ's promise: "I am the Resurrection and the Life."

I had a rather unusual experience this week.

I was walking up Hawthorne Road from Queen's Road, doing some dictation, as I often do early in the mornings, and an old couple pulled up beside me, obviously lost. They said to me, "We need directions to Randolph Road."

I said, "Just go up here past Fourth Street and Third, then hang a right and you are on it."

They had no more driven off than I realized I had transposed the street numbers in my advice!

I had given them wrong directions to Randolph Road! I started to run after them, but they had sped away.

I said to myself, "Big deal, I'll never see them again."

So imagine my surprise when the next morning I opened up the paper and this couple is staring me in the face in a big color picture, Darwin and Mary Byrum, who had just given a half-million dollars to Holy Angels.

They might have given it to St. John's had I just given them the right directions!

They gave a half-million to Holy Angels, which ministers to physically and mentally disabled women.

Why had they done such a thing? Because Darwin and Mary Byrum had raised two daughters born with severe cerebral palsy, and though they had a variety of lifestyle options open to them, as they prayed about it, this couple decided that their life together would be a pilgrimage of ministry, a journey of service to their handicapped daughters.

These very modest, very humble people had poured their lives out in the service to their daughters, and then, with the sale of their property in Ballentyne, found themselves able to give a donation that would benefit the lives of hundreds of young women like the two girls they had nurtured.

Reading their story made me realize that no one can live that kind of life unless resurrection power is not just something that happens to you at the end of your life, for resurrection power is something that feeds your spirit everyday, animating every moment, giving you energy and courage for each daily challenge, giving you strength for the bearing of every cross.

Their journey of ministry, their pilgrimage of service, had made these people spiritually strong and generous: their gift was but a natural reflection of their entire life of faith.

Resurrection power is not just a reality that touches our life at the end; rather resurrection power is the very animating energy of God that fuels our life of love and faith and service in each moment of existence.

The power of resurrection is as real and intimate and necessary as the air we breathe.

Because God is a resurrecting God, no disappointment defines us, no frustration is forever, no failure is final, no defeat is decisive, no death has the last say.

For under it all, beyond it all, above it all, is the resurrection promise of our Christ,

"I am the Resurrection and the Life. Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world!"

Life is a pilgrimage, but it is only a true pilgrimage because the resurrection power of God is real. Sure, our bodies go through a period of growth and maturity, but they eventually decline – and die. But our souls, our personalities, are constantly being enriched by our experience, enriched by our wisdom, enriched by our service and sacrifices of love. We feel as if over a lifetime we are growing in soul. But what sense is our pilgrimage of the spirit if the journey ends in death? If our journey simply ends in death, all we have gained is lost. Again, our lives are wedded to the future of Christ, and the ministry of Christ always pointed beyond himself to a God who is never finished with us. I used to keep a Peanuts cartoon on my wall where Charlie Brown says to Linus, “Ah, my grandfather lost in the finals of a tennis tournament yesterday.” “I’m sorry about that,” says Linus. “It’s alright,” says Charlie Brown, “Granddad says losing is just part of growing up.” Exactly! We never stop growing up! God is always working with us, even in our elderly years! God is never finished with us, for we are always in process – and we always will be, until we find our rest in our heavenly Father. Life is a pilgrimage, a pilgrimage unto our eternal Source, so that all that we learn and gain over the course of living and believing and serving is used to God’s glory, and nothing is wasted.

When we boil our faith down to simplest terms, we believe that life is good. God is good. And God will bring all of creation to a happy ending. A happy ending! I think of John Bunyan, the Baptist Nelson Mandela, (sometime soon I’ll do a homily on that!). John Bunyan wrote one of the world’s first and greatest novels, mostly from prison. *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Late in the book, Christian and Hopeful are nearing the Celestial City, knowing that to reach their destination they must go through the Valley of the Shadow and ford the Great River of Death. Christian asks an angel if the river is all of one depth and the angel says, no, “You shall find it deeper or shallower as you believe in the King of the place.” Christian and Hopeful enter the water, and Christian immediately begins to sink. He cries out to his friend, “I’m drowning!” Hopeful replies, “Be of good cheer, my brother; I feel the bottom and it is good.”

Our Lord says to us, “I am the Resurrection and the Life.” *I!* Ultimately, the doctrine of Resurrection is not a doctrine, for in truth it is a belief that boils down to a relationship of trust, one-on-one trust in the nature of God. There are certain people in this world, if my life was in peril, I know I could call them tonight and they would be by my side the next day. I have the assurance of their presence based on one-on-one trust. There are certain people, no matter what situation I find myself in, no matter what I’ve done, who will always offer me their friendship, their resources, their love. I know this to be true based on many years of one-on-one trust. My friends, I have come to conclude over a lifetime of faith that the God of this universe is at least as good as my best friends. Our Lord says, “I am the Resurrection and the Life! Those who believe in me, though they die, yet shall they live. And those who believe in me shall never really die.” Then Jesus asks the question that cuts down through the ages to our own hearts: “Do you believe this? Do you trust me?” On this Easter morning Martha answers for us all, “Yes, Lord, I believe. I believe you are the Christ, the Son of God who is coming into the world.”

On this Easter morning, our testimony is that of Niecey's,
whose baptism this Easter morning symbolizes the hope of us all:
if we are buried with him in a death like his,
we shall surely be united with him in a resurrection like his.
On the basis of the Christ, my friends, we can be of good cheer.
We can feel the foundation of life – and it is good!
Happy Easter! The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed!

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Easter Sunday, April 16, 2006