

Our Resurrection

April 21, 2019

Grace to you, and peace from God our Creator, from Jesus, the one who opens resurrection to us all, and from the Holy Spirit who unites us all in joy. Christ the Lord is risen today! Alleluia.

Do you remember what you felt like when the Packers won the Super Bowl in 2011? Or in 1997? How about 1966?

Use your own analogy if you're not a Packers fan, but that sweet collective joy is what resurrection is like. Really, I'm not being cute or pandering to a Green Bay audience (OK, well, maybe a little). And apologies to the one Bears fan I know is here on Sunday – David, although you did have that thing in 1986, I admit.

But what I'd like us to reflect on for a little this Easter Sunday is how we may misunderstand resurrection altogether if we think of it in individualistic terms as MY resurrection. I want us to meditate this morning instead on our resurrection – OUR resurrection.

Our gospel in John is a story of relationship, especially the one between Mary Magdalene and Jesus. The disciples get in the act, too, but as the gospel makes clear, they don't quite get it. Mary doesn't get it at first, either. She's mourning. She's lingering at the tomb. She sees a couple of angels – you think that might have been a clue.

And then Jesus shows up. Jesus always shows up. But Mary doesn't recognize him at first. (How often does that happen to us?) Jesus is standing right there, and we don't really see him. New life is standing right before us – a step away – and we don't know it. But then Jesus says her name, "Mary." And she knows. "I have seen the Lord," she says to the disciples when she returns to them hiding out in upper room.

The longer I live, the more the individualistic notion of resurrection strikes me as wrong. When I was a child growing up in Appleton, I was terrified of dying. In part, that was because I said a prayer before bed every night. You may know the prayer: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take, and this I ask for Jesus' sake. Amen."

So, I would say that prayer every night with my mom or dad, and then they'd leave and I'd lie there afraid to close my eyes because I might die. I remember fixating my vision on the street light that reflected off our neighbor's house because as long as I could see the light, I knew I wasn't dead.

Now, I hope you agree with me that that prayer, while well-intentioned, was harmful. And it was harmful not because it made me aware of death – something we all need to face realistically – but because it made me focus on me and my 'soul,' the word used twice in that prayer. The prayer turned me inward and I found fear rather than turning me outward into relationship with God and with others.

Because the notion of the resurrection of the soul didn't come from Jesus, it came from Plato. Plato imagined the person as a dichotomy of body-soul with the body as a prison and the soul as eternal.

The Christian idea, in contrast, as Paul makes plain and as our gospel for today emphasizes, is the resurrection of the BODY. But each of our bodies is distinct, isn't it? And how can all of these different bodies – mine and yours and your and yours – be resurrected? How can that possibly work? Can't believe it, right? Doesn't make sense.

Several years ago, our beloved golden retriever, Charlie, who was the most mellow creature on the planet, really began to deteriorate as he turned 14. He had always loved to hold hands. I'd be sitting on my couch and Charlie would come up to me and plop his paw on my lap and be perfectly content for hours, sitting next to me as I held his paw. We'd watch entire Packers games that way.

But as he aged, Charlie's hips went bad and, while he wasn't in great pain, he no longer ran after tennis balls (and then dropped them and lay down – bringing the ball back was way too much work; the retriever part of his name never really applied to him). But he was a golden – a deep red-gold – in fact.

So, one spring Sunday after I came home from church and undertook to plant some flowers in our front gardens, Lisa, who is a nurse, came to me from the backyard and said, "Jon, I think Charlie is dying. Could you come back here?"

So, I walked into the backyard and there was Charlie lying under his favorite azalea bush, basking in the sun and laboring for breath. "He's been like this for about an hour," Lisa said. "I tried feeding him, but he won't budge." (Food ALWAYS worked with Charlie – he ate ANYTHING.)

I knelt down and held Charlie's paw, looked in his eyes, and saw that, yes, the life was ebbing from him. "Oh, buddy, I said." Our son, Nathan, and his wife, Kate, and our grandson, Jaxon, lived with us at the time, and they joined us in a little congregation.

We each took turns kneeling down, and petting him, and whispering to him, and crying. Our neighbors, Bishop Fred Borsch and his wife, Barbara, stopped by and expressed their sadness with us, too.

And over about 45 minutes, Charlie just gradually slipped away as we huddled around him in the spring sunlight underneath his favorite azalea bush.

Our grandson, Jaxon – four at the time – watched this all with great interest. We had taught Jaxon about heaven, of course, and once Charlie had died and we wrapped him in a blanket, Jaxon asked the question of questions: "Bapa," he said to me looking at me with bewilderment, "Charlie's not in heaven. He's right here!"

I laughed through my tears and hugged him, and said, "Jax, Charlie's in heaven, too. When you die, you can be in more than one place at a time, like water, and Charlie's surrounded by love, just like he was all of his life."

Because THAT's what heaven is, what it means to experience resurrection: pure loving relationship of which we get a foretaste whenever we experience love in this life.

And that's why resurrection can't be primarily about individuals. Resurrection depends upon relationship. Resurrection is OUR resurrection, or not at all.

And this makes sense when you think about it. Our bodies aren't really as distinct as we like to imagine them. It was Martin Luther who bequeathed to us the notion of the individual before God in a salvation transaction. And while that focus on the individual led to some great things – democracy, human rights, separation of church and state – it also led us down some unfortunate theological paths away from the intimate relationship with EVERYTHING that is God's deepest truth to us: that life begins, ends, and goes on in relationship.

Because our bodies are not as distinct as we've been taught. This is obvious when we reflect on it. We breathe the same air, drink the same water, inhabit the same earth. Our bodies here on earth are made of the same stuff – mostly water. How could a resurrection of the BODY be any different? We're all made of the same stuff when we live. Why would it be any different when we die?

And here's the amazing comfort I find in this teaching: it frees us from the fear of death. That childhood fear I had I see now was misplaced, wrong, unnecessary. We can be confident that nothing can separate us from the love of God because Christ the Lord is risen today. Alleluia!

You see, we demonstrate the truth of the resurrection every time we gather together, every time there is an 'us,' every time we celebrate 'our' worship of God. It is through community and communion that we realize that we're all in it together. O death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory? Christ the Lord is risen today. Alleluia!

Which is why I want us to turn now, to our bulletins and take a look together at our Bond of Union. We say this every Sunday. But do we pay attention to what it means, how we might live it out in new ways together? That's what I want us to reflect on as I wrap up.

Giving our all as we have given all. It's been one year since I've been with you here at Union, and it's been a full and good year. I see so many giving of their all for this congregation that it fills my heart with love. And there are many of you here who want to give more and who are doing so in other areas of your life right now. All I can say is that it's been a wonderful thing for me to begin to discover who WE are as a congregation. It's a joy to work with Bridget who is an astounding preacher and who knows so much about ministry that I'm grateful to be learning from her. And it's a joy to be in the company of such dedicated and talented colleagues as Ray and Seong. Did you know that they donated money to purchase the congas that I played last week? And the entire staff – Scott and Winnie and Eric – give their all and make this place truly a joy for me every time I'm here. You may have noticed that I whistle a lot around here. That's not a coincidence. I see each of you as a gift, and I certainly see my calling among you as a gift that I will never take for granted.

We accept the religion of love and service which Jesus lived and taught. I'm actually really proud to be a part of this community where we do, indeed, accept the religion of love and service which Jesus lived and taught through Christian education and faith formation, outreach, inreach, worship, this choir, stewardship, Common Ministry, and all of the ways we live out our faith. I'm proud to be a part of a 'start-up' church – the Underground Railroad, women's suffrage, Habitat for Humanity, EPH, Howe Community Resource Center, On the Mark Dyslexia Clinic,

and so many more in our history. Did you know that On the Mark has 46 students for the summer? Accepting the religion of love and service which Jesus lived and taught means that when we see a problem like students struggling to read, we work together to help solve it. I'm proud to tell people that I'm a pastor of this church that serves so many.

Declare it our purpose to do the will of God. God's will is for us to have abundant life like our beautiful planet in spring. So, God wants us to grow. I won't ordinarily lift up particular congregants in a sermon, but I do want to lift up today Dr. Rolf and Ann Lulloff. How they've taken Ann's Parkinson's and turned it into a God-driven purpose: to found the Brain Center of Green Bay. I'm truly thrilled to be part of this new ministry and excited to see how it takes root in our repurposed YCA Room. The mission of the Brain Center is to promote brain health from birth through the life course. And our acronym is CARE: Collaboration, Advocacy, Research, and Education. Our purpose is to do the will of God, the God who unites us, is our advocate, encourages knowledge, and is our ultimate teacher – wisdom incarnate. Imagine for a minute, if you will, God's brain and how we're connected to it through Jesus, through Holy Communion, through prayer, through community. And that's truly mind-blowing, isn't it? God's brain is resurrection incarnate, wisdom incarnate, our resurrection.

And to make the Christ Spirit dominant in our lives and in all human relations. When the Christ Spirit is dominant in our lives and in all human relations, it means love is dominant – for everyone, no exceptions. For example, on May 4 we're sponsoring our immigration advocacy teach-in. This service to the community will bring cutting-edge education from immigration-serving leaders into our midst AND bring some great Latin jazz in the concluding worship. But it takes all of us to get the word out and to bring the community in, making the Christ Spirit dominant in our lives and in all human relations.

So, I hope you have heard God's word speaking to us of new life, eternal life, life in community, through the gospel for today. It's a word of peace and joy. Sheer grace. Our resurrection is real. Christ the Lord is risen today! Alleluia!

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