

RESURRECTION IN REAL TIME

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But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified.” (Matthew 28:5)

Do not be afraid? Some things are easier said than done. When I was growing up an elderly parishioner of the church where my father was the rector would often invite the family over to dinner. Miss Pierson was a tiny lady with an iron will who lived alone in a big old house, in a declining neighborhood of East Orange, NJ. For days in advance I would dread these evenings. First of all, when we arrived it was like pulling up to 1313 Mockingbird Lane – Herman Munster’s house (Google it, people; we’ve all got nothing but time on our hands). Secondly, to protect herself Miss Pierson had acquired a dog – not just any dog, but a colossal beast named Smoky. For the first part of the evening Smoky would be confined to a room off to the side. As we would sit and listen to my parents and Miss Pierson exchange pleasantries, Smoky would snarl and paw at the door, wanting badly to join us. I would sit there quaking with fear.

When dinner inevitably ran its course, Miss Pierson would declare, “It’s time to let Smoky out.” This was the moment I hated. She would get up from the table, open the door, and Smoky would come thundering into the dining room with all the fury of Pharaoh’s chariots and horsemen. Part Labrador retriever, part Rottweiler, part alligator, Smoky would make a few frantic, reckless, mindless laps around the table, and eventually come right up to me – why always me? – put his paws in my lap, open his gaping jaws, drool all over me, and howl. I had all I could do not to wet my pants! Meanwhile my older brother Steve loved every minute of it, and laughed at me. My parents tried to tell me not to be afraid. Miss Pierson tried to tell me not to be afraid. But no one could convince me not to be afraid while that huge and hideous hound galloped around the table. Do not be afraid? Easier said than done.

What follows will be an Easter sermon about fear – the fear of death. Death is a reality that waits for us always, snarling and pawing at the doors of life. It waits for its moment to be released into your party, to come thundering into your life, to make its reckless, pointless, mindless laps around you and those you love. Unfortunately, we don’t need the metaphor of an attack dog to bring the reality of death home to us. Here in New York City we are living in the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic, with staggering numbers of deaths every day. People who were in motion and full of potential only a month ago have stopped forever. Millions of others have lost their jobs as the necessity to shelter at home has devastated the economy. Businesses that were thriving and giving people purpose and potential are now shuttered, some never to reopen. A profound lethargy has settled over the land like a blanket. We wonder: what will be the long term effects of being cooped up for months on end? When will it be safe again to come out and gather in large crowds? How do we shake off our malaise and get this party started again?

We like to think that God endows all of creation – including you, and me, and the earth itself – with sacred potential, with forward momentum. Then a loved one dies, and all that could have been or should have been in and through the life of that person comes grinding to a halt. The potential for growth, productivity, even reconciliation is lost. It is said that all grief comes down to a simple reality: we run out of time. Something ends before you think it ought to end. A dream goes bust, a relationship breaks, and all the bright possibility and promise inherent in the beginning dies unfulfilled. It could be that you yourself have tuned in today grieving the loss of what might have been. Your own personal history has veered off course from where it was naturally headed only a short time ago. All of us find ourselves on a dark and declining street – a street we never expected to travel. Our lives are frighteningly fragile. Do not be afraid? Easier said than done.

Let me guess: you are not sitting in front of your screen today hoping for a heaping helping of existential despair. You are waiting for me to serve up some Easter joy. Well, the time has come, but not necessarily in the way you might think. I won't pretend that you don't know the Easter story. What you may not know is that the four Evangelists – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – each have their own particular way of talking about the first Easter Day. These historically reliable documents vary at points, but all agree on the essentials. Certain people who had been present on Friday for the public execution of Jesus discovered his tomb to be empty on Sunday morning. Then they began encountering him alive again in the flesh. Soon others also began meeting the risen Jesus. The cowardly disciples who had fled in fear returned and regrouped, and began preaching a single proclamation: Christ is risen. Jesus lives. I have seen the Lord. The message spread. The church grew. The Spirit came. And the rest, as they say, is history.

It *is* history. We are indeed on safe historical ground to declare that something stupendous, something unique, something unlike anything that had ever occurred before happened at the tomb of Jesus. You cannot explain how or why the Jesus movement continued without a game-changing event at the tomb on Easter morning. The skeptics are fond of saying that the church invented the resurrection. But the skeptics have it backwards. The church didn't invent the resurrection. The resurrection invented the church. The resurrection happened in history, and then came the church in response to it. For you and me, it means that we have a reasonable and holy hope that death is not the end. Even though we die, yet shall we live. The potential that God endows in you and me will find its fulfillment in God. The good work that God begins in us will continue its forward momentum, from this time forth, even forever. Thus, we can sing with the Psalmist (118:17): *I shall not die, but live.*

Let's get it straight, then: Easter is about the past, when God defeated death at the tomb of Jesus. And Easter is about the future, when God will raise us from our deaths and bring us to heaven. Both of these orientations to Easter – one looking to the past and one looking to the future – would be faithful responses to the day. I will give a rousing two cheers to what most of us think about Easter. I give two cheers and not three because the popular take on Easter misses the main arena of operation: the present. Yes, Easter is history. Yes, Easter is a future promise. But Easter is also a current reality.

Here is where I believe Matthew's perspective makes a unique contribution to our Easter faith. In the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and John, by the time anyone arrives at the tomb of Jesus, the stone has already been rolled away. The deed has already been done. It is the calm after the storm. But in Matthew, the storm is in progress. The scene depicted on your bulletin cover is chaotic (*"The Women at the Sepulchre,"* by Benjamin West, 1805). Mary Magdalene and the other Mary arrive at the tomb in the midst of an earthquake, as the angel of the Lord descends from heaven, rolls away the stone, and sits on it. The guards quake in fear, and so do the women. The angel says, *"Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen as he said. Come, see the place where he lay."* Next, the women run from the tomb in fear and great joy, and they meet Jesus himself. Matthew takes us ringside and gives us a very present, urgent resurrection in real time, as it is happening. For this gospel writer resurrection is in the present, when heaven and earth overlap and intersect and mingle together.

Matthew's perspective should remind us of a simple detail of the Easter story that I think we often neglect: Jesus came back to this life. Easter is as much about the here and now as it is about the hereafter. None of the Gospels, but most especially not Matthew, depict the risen Jesus off on a cloud, plucking a harp, waving to us saying, "I am risen, indeed. It's great here in heaven. Do come join me some day in the life to come. Happy Easter!" Note how Jeremiah (31:1-6), the prophet of old, prefigured the same thing. God would restore the captives exiles to a life they recognized: *Again, you shall take your tambourines and go forth with the merrymakers.* The refrain of the word "again" is significant. The Day of the Lord will come to the here and now. Likewise, the Easter message proclaims that Jesus came back to this life. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son – again, a second time.

The resurrected life of Christ is available to us in real time – now. When we recite in the Nicene Creed, “*We look for the resurrection of the dead,*” we don’t mean a day far off in the future. We mean today.

We look for the resurrection of the dead. The phrase could easily serve as the mission statement of a church. Looking for the resurrection is what we do. It is why we are part of the Jesus movement – not to cheat death, but to look for and receive the resurrected life of Christ. So I am ready to look for the resurrection of the dead in this life, on this side of the grave. I am ready to look for it in myself. I am ready to look for it in you: in the deepest of your depressions, in the most devastating of your diseases, in the darkness of your grief. I am ready to look for the resurrection of the dead in unlikely places and unlikely people. Obvious places. Dangerous places. Dangerous people. All places and people. I will look for the resurrection of the dead, and I will expect to see glimmers of it because Christ is risen, indeed. God loves us with an everlasting love, and promises: “*Again I will build you, and you shall be built.*”

What sort of things do we find when we look for the resurrection in the here and now? A story from the days of the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott serves to illustrate. When Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of a bus, she sparked the modern civil right movement in this country. But by late 1956, while the boycott had made some strides, it was faltering. The forward momentum was slowing. The promise and possibility of social progress were meeting stiff resistance. The Klan was actively menacing participants, and the city was seeking a legal injunction to shut down the carpools that blacks had organized to get themselves to work. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was in despair, fearing that he had let down the people who had put at risk their jobs and well-beings under his leadership. It was a particularly grim time.

Then, when the bus boycott participants and their supporters least expected it, amazingly good news reached them. The U.S. Supreme Court had upheld a lower court ruling that Alabama’s bus segregation laws were illegal. A great victory had been won, and black Montgomery was jubilant. But the Klan was equally angry. In fact, that very night they organized forty carloads of Klansman to come thundering into the black neighborhoods, and conduct intimidating drives through their communities. Normally, when the Klan came cruising through their towns, blacks would shelter inside, keep the lights off, and their doors locked tight. On this night, however, they opened their doors, turned on their lights, and came out onto their front porches. They smiled and waved at the costumed Klansmen as they made their mindless laps around the neighborhoods. Somehow, in the new light of victory, the formerly fearsome robes and hoods of the Klan didn’t appear fearful at all. They looked silly, ridiculous, even pre-pubescent. Many blacks on their porches not only smiled and waved, they laughed. The dance of the merrymakers had begun. Dr. King commented that they acted as though they were watching a circus parade go by¹.

The movement that God’s will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven has begun. Nothing can stop it, and all of heaven rejoices. “Do not be afraid,” said the angel at the empty tomb of Jesus. “Do not be afraid,” said the risen Jesus to the women. “Do not be afraid,” said Miss Pierson as Smoky came thundering towards me. She was right. Smoky, the vicious attack dog, never hurt anyone. He ran around a lot. He made a big noise and he loved to scare people. But Smoky’s bark was all he had.

So this morning we ask: O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? O Smoky, where is thy bite? Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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¹ Marsh, Charles. The Beloved Community, Basic Books, 2005, p. 47.