

## YOU SHALL BE LOVED

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Grace Church in New York  
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Thus says the Lord God through the prophet Isaiah: *I am about to create new heavens and a new earth ... I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people. (from Isaiah 65:17-19)*

I enjoy reading obituaries.

My guess is that if you were to write the first sentence of an Easter sermon, those four words would not be it. But it's true. I enjoy reading obituaries – not the teeny-tiny ones that you need a magnifying glass to see, but the full length feature articles that tell the big story of someone's life. Take, for example, Vera Gissing, who died on March 12<sup>th</sup> at the age of 93. According to her obituary<sup>1</sup>, the big story of Vera Gissing's life was something called "the Kindertransport" that occurred just before World War Two.

In 1938 a 29-year old British banker named Nicholas Winton was visiting friends in Czechoslovakia. Rumors of an impending Nazi invasion were on everyone's mind, and the Czech people were terrified. The Jews, especially, were searching for a way out of the country, but borders were closing all over Eastern Europe. Winton himself was Jewish. He was a person of ability and ambition who wanted to help. He realized he could not evacuate adults, but he saw an opening to rescue Jewish children before it was too late. Once back in England he worked to clear the legal and logistical hurdles of bringing refugee children into the country, one of which was making sure every child would have a foster family for the duration of the war. Soon, Jewish Czech parents who had made the agonizing decision to part with their children were loading them onto trains and planes bound for England. It was called the Kindertransport. In all, Winton was able to transport 669 children to safety just in the nick of time.

One of those children was ten-year old Vera Diamantova (later, Vera Gissing). After a heartbreaking farewell to her parents at the Prague train station she was on her way. Vera didn't know it at the time but she would never again see her mother or her father, both of whom would perish in Nazi camps. Upon arrival in London Vera was the last child to be placed with her foster family – the Rainfords of Liverpool. She was waiting, alone, in a large room when finally the door opened. In came Mrs. Rainford. Vera recalled, *"And as she saw me, she started laughing and smiling and crying at the same time and she ran toward me, flung her arms around me, and she spoke some words I didn't understand then, but they were, 'You shall be loved.' And loved I was. And you know, those are the most important words any child in danger, any child in need, can hear."*

"You shall be loved."

My guess is that if you were to write the first sentence of an Easter sermon, those four words might do the trick. But do you see now why I enjoy reading obituaries? When I first read of the extraordinary meeting between Vera and her foster mother I thought of today. Today is Easter Day, the highest feast of the Christian year. For us, no other day compares. Why? Because the Christian faith begins not with the birth of Jesus, not with the teachings of Jesus, not with the death of Jesus. The Christian faith begins with the resurrection of Jesus. Without this mighty miracle of God the disciples of Jesus would have remained scattered, his teachings forgotten, his movement ended, his birth never recorded. But because of what God did on this day everything is changed. To cut to the quick, here we are.

The writers of the four Gospels each have a different way of describing what happened. But neither Matthew, Mark, Luke, nor John aimed to be a journalist reporting just the facts. Instead, their goal was to explain how it came to be that the defeated followers of Jesus began making the claim that their crucified leader was the Messiah of God, the Savior of the world, the forgiver of all sins. Why would they say such things? Even though the four accounts vary in detail, they are all in agreement concerning the basics. When some women came to the tomb of Jesus early on Sunday morning, they found the stone rolled away and the body missing. Then, in short order, Jesus began appearing in bodily form to them and multiple other witnesses. Neither the empty tomb nor the appearances alone would be sufficient to explain the dawn of the church, but both were necessary conditions to account for the proclamation that Jesus lived. Both had to occur to sit us in our pews today. And together the empty tomb and the appearances make the only sufficient argument to explain the history that ensued. Jesus had risen from the dead.

The skeptics are fond of saying that you can't trust the Gospel accounts because they were written decades after the event. In reply we say, "of course, we know they were." The Easter experience was unnerving, even dumbfounding. The risen Jesus was neither a ghost nor a dead man returned to life. Was he the gardener, or a fellow traveler on the road, or Jesus? Where did he go between appearances? It was completely disconcerting. They didn't understand it at all. It took years for the first witnesses to find the language to describe the Easter experience. They searched their own Scriptures for any precedent, and finally concluded that Isaiah's prophesy of the new creation came closest to the mark. The resurrection of Jesus was the beginning of the age to come that we heard about today in Isaiah. It was a foretaste of the new heavens and new earth that God had been promising. The promise was that no longer would people labor in futility and die prematurely. No longer would potential be cut short. No longer would the wolf feed on the lamb. No longer would the lion devour the cow. These former things would not be remembered or come to mind. For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord. Indeed, the resurrection of Jesus is God's way of assuring the whole world: you have a future. "You shall be loved."

It's a lovely thought, isn't it? In Eastertide we sing, *The powers of death hath done their worst, but Christ their legions hath dispersed*. The problem seems to be that the powers of death have an extraordinary ability to regroup and repeat the same old ugly history generation after generation. Witness the similarity between the Europe of Vera Gissing's childhood and the Europe of today. Seventy-seven years of progress has melted away. Just when we think the powers of death have been dispersed, evil surges forth like another wave of the virus that has interrupted if not ended the bright potential that was ready to blossom in millions of people.

Every spring the neighborhood around Grace Church awaits the blossoming of the magnificent magnolia tree in the rectory yard. You know it's coming, but it's still a surprise. The sheer beauty of it is enough to take your breath away. Except, not this year. Just a few weeks ago, just as the tree was ready to pop, a late freeze gripped the city and killed all the blossoms, leaving the tree filled with dry brown reminders of the lost potential, of what should have been. St. Paul would write that all of creation has been groaning in travail, awaiting God's promised new creation. Europe burns. The virus surges. Indeed, our cry goes up, "how long?"

Not long ago I was walking up Broadway, returning to the rectory after running some errands. I was dressed in civilian attire so you never would have guessed that I was a priest. No, you never would have guessed that on a good day I am semi in-charge of Grace Church that was coming into view. Beside me was a group of chatty tourists that was keeping pace with me. I could tell that they were tourists because they were carrying new handbags that appeared to be knockoffs from Chinatown. I could overhear what they were saying. I should warn you (in parentheses) that I am often outside the church in civilian attire, overhearing what people say. So be careful of your words or you, too, might wind up taking the fall in a sermon. One woman who was part of the group declared, "*Oh, look at this cute little church!*"

Now, first I'm going to tell you what I actually said in response. Then I'll tell you what I wanted to say. Finally I'll tell you what I should have said. What I actually said was nothing. I kept on walking. I may have rolled my eyes a bit, but I might hasten to add it was a Christ-like eye roll. What I wanted to do was turn around and ask, "Excuse me, it's none of my business, but what about this is little? The spire isn't little. It's 225 feet high. The maintenance bills aren't little. The cost to restore the west rose stained glass window certainly isn't going to be little. Just wait till the people of Grace Church hear about that one! They're going to love it. Capital campaigns are fun. It will be big. So what about this is little?" That's what I wanted to say. Now let me tell you what I should have said. "Come inside and see. Come inside because Grace Church is much bigger on the inside than you think it's going to be. Come inside, because the promises of God are much bigger and more surprising on the inside than they ever appear to be on the outside.

For example, it's been five years now since we built the beautiful columbarium inside the church. A columbarium is a resting place for the ashes of our departed loved ones. We wanted it to look as if it had always been here, even to resemble the pews right down to the brass nameplates. We located it in the south transept simply because that's where it would fit. Something I've noticed on sunny days is how the light from the stained glass window next to the columbarium glances off the brass name plates so that they shine like the sun. I've always enjoyed the sight – seated upon my throne over there, high and lifted up – but only last week did I put two and two together and experience a minor theological and architectural surprise. Guess the theme of the window shining on the brass plates. Hello! It is the resurrection window. Nobody planned it that way, but surprise! The suggestion is that as much as the sun in the sky illuminates the name plates, even more so does the risen Son of God, the Light of Christ, throw his arms around even those who have died, saying, "You shall be loved."

I'll be the first to admit that a happy architectural coincidence is neither necessary nor sufficient to prove the resurrection. But sometimes God speaks to us in a language we don't easily or at least initially understand, and faith becomes our interpreter. As for me, I take it as an invitation to trust in the promises of God because they are always bigger and more surprising on the inside than they are on the outside. The new creation has begun. Despite what may be all appearances to the contrary, the day has dawned. God has reclaimed this whole ruined little world and doesn't intend ever to give up on it. Daring such faith, and having such trust can empower anyone to venture forth into our death-filled societies and shine the light of resurrection upon them.

Vera Gissing would give thanks always for those who did what they did and saved her life: her mother and father who had the courage to let her go; the extraordinary man, Nicholas Winton, who organized the Kindertransport and gave hope and a future to hundreds of children; and the Rainford family who took her in and gave her a loving home. Years later she asked Mr. Rainford why he did it. They were not a wealthy family and taking in another child would surely be a hardship. Why did he do it? He replied to Vera, "I knew I couldn't save the world, I knew I couldn't stop war from coming, but I knew I could save one human life." So the family chose Vera, and loved she was.

*"I am about to create new heavens and a new earth ... I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people."* Thus spoke the Lord through the prophet Isaiah. But Vera Gissing's foster mother, Mrs. Rainford, boiled it down to four words – just four words: *"You shall be loved."*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/25/world/europe/vera-gissing-dead.html>