

Easter VI
St. Paul's SLC
May 17, 2009
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I. Throughout the Easter Season this year I have been thinking a lot about 'resurrection:' about how we understand it, what it signifies to us. I have tried not to turn resurrection into a concept, just an idea, and I have not made a scholarly study of the subject. I won't try to explain it, because no one can do that—or to explain it away, because others before me have tried to do that (rather unsuccessfully). Rather, I have reflected on the gospel lessons appointed for this Easter season, to discover what they may indicate to us about Christ's resurrection—particularly as it affects us—as individuals and communities.

It became clear to me that if I was going to think about resurrection, I first had to think about death. I was prompted in this awareness by noticing the great piles of dead branches along my street this spring—all waiting to be picked up. These branches were indeed dead—gray, brittle and very dead. If one stepped on a pile it would crackle and snap; if one tossed a lighted match on one it would surely burn. BUT they had once been alive, verdant with leaves and maybe even blossoms. I tried to think what could happen to bring them back to life, and could think of no possibilities whatever.

II. As you will recall, the first two or three Sundays of the Easter Season presented us with appearances or sightings of the crucified Jesus—now walking about, talking, letting the disciples see and touch his wounds, even eating breakfast with them on the shore of the lake.

Many people assume that this is what resurrection is—the recognizably physical regeneration of a person. Something like that is part of the testimony of scripture, and it is a witness Christians have always honored—whatever they think happened or what it means. He appeared to have returned to life!

III. My Aunt Carol was probably one who thought about resurrection in this way. [Incidentally, Aunt Carol turned 100 on Christmas Day last year—she was in fact christened “Christmas Carol.”] Anyway Carol had a son she dearly loved. Bill was a bit younger than me and he was a fine actor. He was also a gay man who died of Aids back in the 80's when little in the way of medical help was available.

Carol was inconsolable—in part I think because she felt she couldn't tell anyone in Parowan, Utah about the cause of his death at such a young age. BUT after his memorial service she faced another painful situation. She told me that Bill wanted his ashes scattered over Bryce Canyon—where he had been the MC in the lodge for many years—all through high school and college.

“BUT,” said Carol, “I so want a little gravesite in the Parowan cemetery, where I can go to say a prayer for him each day.” (The cemetery being about a five-minute walk from her home.)

Enter her “fix everything” niece, Carolyn. “Well, Aunt Carol, let's scatter half of his ashes over Bryce and bury the other half in the cemetery.” A look of utter confusion and astonishment came over her face, and she said to me, “What about the resurrection?” (repeat) With all the conviction in the world I replied, “We can leave that to God, aunt Carol.” And slowly but surely her crooked little smile returned.

IV. I suppose Carol assumed—and perhaps many people do—that the Christian promise of resurrection has to do with reassembling the molecules of a person's body in such a way that it lives again. Maybe it is, and maybe Jesus was put back together in this way; but in all candor, this understanding of resurrection has never spoken to me. I can't imagine believing that or choosing it or wishing it on other people. But I do believe that Christ lives and will live forever; that both the disciples and we ourselves experience new life in him; and that God brings forth amazing and wonderful gifts from all of that life.

Consider the lessons of the next two Sundays of Easter. “I am the Good Shepherd.” “I am the true vine.” These are two of the great “I am” statements in John's gospel—others are “I am the bread of life,” “I am the way, the truth and the life,” “I am the light of the world,” “I am the resurrection and the life.” In these statements it is John's intent is that we identify Jesus with God, for “I am” is what God called himself when Moses asked for God's name.

V. All of these statements are also indications of God's gracious and eternal gifts to us through the risen Christ. Through the image of the Good Shepherd, we are assured that there is one who cares about us—each of us and all of us—even to the point of giving up his own life for us. Through the image of the true vine we are assured that we have resurrection life flowing through our veins. His bread sustains and strengthens us, and his light shows us the way. All these gifts are signs of Christ's resurrection, through which God brings forth something new, and ever new. We discover in them a whole new level of human and personal existence.

And—there is one more gift we hear of today. It is JOY. When Jesus bids us to abide in his love as he abides in God’s love—it means we are to live in it (to dwell in it) the way birds live in the air and fish live in the sea. It is a love eternally available to us.

Then Jesus says, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” Throughout the history of the church it seems that we have generally focused more on trouble, sin, pain and conflict, than on joy. But take with you today what Jesus says he desires for us—that his joy may be in us and that our joy may be complete—full, eternal, and life-giving.

AMEN