

April 16, 2006

# “The Resurrection and The Life”

EASTER SUNDAY – April 16, 2006 – 7:00 am, 8:30 am, and 10:30 am

by

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**TEXT:** *John 11:25-26* – 25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

Wow! What a gracious moment this is! What a glorious morning to be alive. Easter is here, and we are called to celebrate. And there are few words better to utter this morning than “Wow!”

There’s nothing quite like the momentous and overwhelming joy of worship on Easter Sunday. It is the supreme homecoming, the final reckoning, and the absolute graduation exercise. It is the best party, the utmost reunion, and the grandest symphony. It is the definitive victory, the ultimate prize, and the chief satisfaction of humanity’s deepest longings. Easter is all these realities and more, because of one simple yet mystically dynamic reality: resurrection. The apostle Paul said it best: *“If Christ is not raised, then [our] faith is futile.”* But I get ahead of myself. More on the resurrection in just a moment.

First, we need to ask, “What is Easter ... for all of us?”

For some, this is ...

*A Morning of New Life* -- New life is now, finally, breaking through the resistance of a hardy winter. And that new life is now burgeoning all around and throughout our yards and gardens and parks. Easter is centered upon the fact of new life which God provides for all creation and which God can offer all individuals.

For others, this is ...

*A Morning of Happy Celebration* – You know how much I have emphasized this reality with you time and again: *Life is not meant merely to be tolerated, it is meant to be celebrated!* Tim Whitmer has it exactly right and knows this! And Tim knows what you and I also know: there is no greater time for celebration than Easter. Celebration is why we augment our Easter musical proclamations with beautiful brass orchestrations, and jazz vocalists, and powerful choral compositions. And even though some folks enjoy being curmudgeons, there is something in us all that prefers smiles to scowls, good times to bad, the sweetness of celebration to the bitter dregs of degradation. In short, don't we all like to party, even just a little, more than we like to frown?

For still others this is ...

*A Morning of Optimistic Feelings*– The central thesis of the Easter reality is, we like to assume, we can overcome the appearances of a Good Friday world with an Easter faith. Because love overcomes all obstacles, and because new life abides as a real possibility for all people, there is all the reason in the world to have optimistic feelings. “You can make it, you can make it, I can make it, we all can make it, this is what Easter's for.” Right? Well, maybe in part but never all together. Easter is so much more.

Lately I've to put together some Easter metaphors, similes, and comparisons. Let's see what you think?

Easter is....

... as clear as the horizon at the first glint of dawn....

... as gentle as a baby's cheek....

... as undeterred as God's great turning of the earth upon its axis....

... as revolutionary as you forgiving yourself....

... as saving as the words "I love you"....

... as crucial as your next gulp of air....

... as sumptuous as the best comfort food you've ever known....

... as comfortable as clover on a spring day, on a hillside, with blue skies above and the blanket of a soothing breeze over you, and only thoughts of good tomorrows on our mind....

... as lightning-quick as a Quik Trip cashier making change....

... as cool as the other side of the pillow.

Pretty good, don't you think? Well, not nearly good enough, I'm afraid.

What the New Testament gospelers all agree on is that Easter is about *none* of the above. Instead Easter is about the resurrection. *"While the virgin birth, miracles, and the teaching of Jesus appear in some New Testament books and are missing in others, faith in the resurrection is common to all."* (*The People's New Testament Commentary*, p. 101)

Now the various accounts of the resurrection are impossible to harmonize into a congruent whole. They differ and diverge in significant ways.

Mark's gospel is a kind of *"stop-and-go, go-and-stop"* gospel, in that three women go to the tomb, and there are no appearances of Jesus. And they flee in fear.

Matthew is sort of the *"increasing appearance"* gospel, as he tells the resurrection story with two women going to the tomb, both of experience Jesus appearing to them, and then later in Galilee to all the disciples.

Luke tells it differently still, in a *"kaleidoscopic way,"* jumping from place to place, with three specifically named women going to the tomb (in addition to another unnamed woman) with no appearances to the women but appearances to two guys on the road to Emmaus. Then Jesus appears to all the disciples at once.

John's gospel tells it in a *"he-called-my-name"* fashion, as he has Jesus appearing tenderly to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning near the tomb setting, and then to ten disciples (minus Thomas, to whom he will appear later), and then to the eleven disciples one week later. Then, in a kind of denouement, he appears to seven of the apostles in Galilee.

Now among all of our assumptions and investigations of all the gospel accounts of the resurrection, one fact must be focused upon and admitted: In none of the gospel accounts is there an eye-witness description of the actual resurrection itself. None. If you can find one,

they'll likely create a new category and grant you a Nobel Prize for Religious Genius Work for the year 2006.

Which means that the resurrection remains a mystery. Which means that perhaps the most appropriate approach to Easter is one of awe-struck wonder rather than dogmatic domination. Instead of whooping up on the rest of the world that may not hold to our belief in the resurrection of Jesus – “*Hey, hey, look at us world! Our guy won, we can prove it!*” – it behooves us to remember the responses of the apostles and abide in humility as we join our voices in declaring that Jesus is raised from the dead.

*So what is resurrection?*

*Is it renewal?* While renewal is always preferable and ultimately needed in our family life, job situations, and school endeavors, and social circles, resurrection is always more than renewal.

*Is it rejuvenation?* While rejuvenation is, of course, absolutely required for our physical bodies and our emotional well-being, resurrection is always more than rejuvenation.

*Is it restoration?* While restoration is appropriate for relationships as well as for buildings, and while restoration of one's sense of wholeness and integrity is essential, resurrection is always more than restoration.

*Is it revival?* While revival is ever and again a much-needed experience in churches, and neighborhoods, and individuals, resurrection is always more than revival.

*Is it resuscitation?* While resuscitation happens not only in hospitals, gently tendered by doctors, nurses, and other health care workers, resurrection is always more than resuscitation.

No, resurrection is different than these alliterative, synonymous possibilities. Resurrection, to put it simply, is the “always more” of God's grace and love.

Some folks believe erroneously that the Christian faith is about the immortality of the soul, about what *we* can accomplish beyond the threat of debilitation, despair or even death. But resurrection is so much more than that. Resurrection is not really about immortality. Immortality is more a philosophical statement about the possibilities of human nature.

Resurrection, on the other hand, is about God and God acts on the behalf and for the benefit of those who are dead.

Which is why, in John's gospel, Jesus can proclaim the resurrection and his absolute identification with the resurrection nearly nine chapters before the crucifixion takes place.

In his seventh and last sign in John's gospel, Jesus revives and resuscitates Lazarus. And he does so, in order to point to that which is "always more": his (Jesus') resurrection that will be unlike anything the world has ever seen. Jesus was obviously a close friend of Lazarus and the two sisters Mary and Martha. And surely his love for them compelled him to raise Lazarus in a fashion that was utterly unique. But it was in order to show a sign about Jesus' own resurrection. When Martha nearly chastises him for being two days late in responding to Lazarus' trouble, Jesus simply responds "Lazarus will rise again."

"Oh I believe in the so-called resurrection," you can nearly hear her say, "and I know that our brother Lazarus will ultimately rise again, in God's own time. But that time isn't here yet."

"Oh yes it is," Jesus says in essence, with what must have been a searing glance that touched her to her soul. And then he utters the greatest "*I am ...*" saying in all of John's entire gospel: "*I am the resurrection and the life.*"

Now the word for resurrection in the new Testament is  $\nabla<\nabla\Phi\theta\Delta>\nabla$ . Meaning, "*against stasis.*" Against the static, the stultified, the staid, the stuck. It is part of Jesus' plan to raise up Lazarus as a sign of his own raising, only Jesus' raising will be a resurrection, beyond all stasis.

And Martha sees what he means. When he asks, "Do you believe this?," you can hear in her words an unwavering answer, a reply touched with awe-filled grace: "Oh yes, I see. I can see farther than I've ever seen before. I can see all the way to what looks like the beginning of a glimpse at the first dawning of what might be eternity that is beginning *now!*"

For Martha and Mary, and for us, what Jesus says about his being the resurrection mysteriously transforms all worry and anxiety into faith and gladness.

What Jesus is as the resurrection will change those who were “no people” into “God’s people.”

And Jesus as the resurrection, then in his own time and for generations forever thereafter, will lift up the downtrodden and embolden those who have been used, abused, or confused.

In real time the power of God’s love rolls the away the stone of despair so that we all might walk forth into a bright daybreak of merciful hope.

In this scene Jesus reveals God’s ultimate prescription for the sicknesses of a strife-riddled, war-torn, speed-driven, power-addicted world.

Through the presence of Christ at Lazarus’ tomb and then through God’s powerful presence at Jesus’ tomb, resurrection is the great testimony that love’s incessant truths always outlast the deceptions of death.

Through the resurrection, the *via dolorosa* becomes the *via gloriosa*. The way of sorrow becomes the way of glory.

Which is a great thing, in and of itself. But if that’s all Easter is about, then we can put away the trumpets and silence our celebration and file out of here with no further ado.

Over the last couple of weeks, a lot of you have been asking me about the newly published “Gospel of Judas.” Allow me to say a couple of things quickly about it, which may illuminate also something about the trouble with merely resting on the first half of Jesus’ statement about being “the resurrection....”

Always we need to be open to new light, particularly new accounts of Jesus’ life, ministry, and meaning. To wit, we need never be afraid of any new discovery. But the gospel of Judas is not very new. It’s actually much like the gnostic gospels that came before it. The first mistake that gnostic gospels make is *denying the significance of the body in preference for the spirit*. In gnostic gospels, like the gospel of Judas, there is a consistent miscalculation that physical matter doesn’t really, ultimately matter as much as spirit. Which is a wholesale affront to the notion of the incarnation, or, as John’s gospel says it so beautifully for us on

Christmas Eve, "*The word became flesh....*" Gnostic gospels always deny such a radical identification with human flesh. And the gospel of Judas is consistent with that mistake.

The second mistake the gospel of Judas makes is in holding to "*salvation through secrecy.*" Gnostic gospels are predicated on the basis of a "secret insight," a "secret wisdom," a "secret knowledge" all of which only a few select folks can know. Notice the opening lines of "*The Gospel of Judas*" - "*The secret account of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot.*" And there never was a bigger lie. *All* of the gospel accounts announce that they are open to public, in varying ways and with varying angles of interpretation, so that *all* may know and believe and *all* may live in the ways of Jesus.

In an argument in support of an embodied life and in support of an "open secret" accessible to all, John's gospel has Jesus saying that he is "*The resurrection ... and ... the ... life.*"

Meaning? If we believe in the resurrection, we're all in for an "extreme makeover!"

Meaning? When we engage in our ritual greeting of "Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!", we are declaring that God has granted victory over all obstacles. God's love conquers any thing and every thing that would attempt to demean or debase the goodness of creation. And this faint echo, there is still reason for holding on to hope. Because when Easter has come, when it really hits home in our hearts, nothing ever remains the same.

Here's what it means. It means that Jesus gives us not only an entry into a life beyond death, but in this day, in this existence, *Jesus gives us a way of life - resplendent with possibilities for compassion, caring, justice, mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation, and fulfillment - and then he bids us to give that way of life away to others.* It means we can stop trying to seek out and secure only what we don't have and can instead receive what God has already given us.

John Fowles (famous for his novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*), once described "*that desert-making heresy that happiness is having what one lacks.*" This is our problem these days - isn't it? - seeking after what we think we don't have in order to feel or pretend that we're all

right? And when we engage in such desert-making heresies, *“an age of self gives way to another age of hell.”* (*Poems*, John Fowles)

Resurrection is about heavenly experiences that are also available in *this* life. What if we took that way of life that Jesus first gave us and gave it away each day? It might be like this candle. When I light the other candle, my candle doesn't diminish in any way shape or form. In giving my light away, it fulfills a broader function, a higher destiny, a greater fame.

*Living the resurrection* is what Jesus is talking about when he announces “I am the resurrection and the life.” Which is exactly what Breanna Morey knows all about.

Just recently, I received a gift package with a loving note in it. *“This bag of Easter candy is given to each resident of Edgewood Manor with love and compassion from Breanna Morey,”* the note read. It went on to say Breanna's age and mentioned her living in Raytown where Edgewood Manor is situated. Then her note stated, *“As part of [Breanna's] Pastor's Class in 2005, all the children in the class are asked to perform a service project. The children decide as to what the project will be, tell the minister what it will be and have one year to complete the service project. Breanna knew almost immediately that she wanted to do something for a nursing facility. When her grandfather was recently admitted to Edgewood Manor for therapy following back surgery, she said right away that she wanted to do Easter candy bags for the residents. Breanna is a member of Community Christian Church, 4601 Main Street, Kansas City, Missouri 64112.... Breanna delivered 70 bags of candy for the residents with 55 bags of regular candy and 15 bags for diabetic residents to enjoy. The staff is welcome if extra bags are left.”* As you can imagine, the residents of Edgewood Manor love Breanna. And, after the gifts and her visits with every resident in all 70 rooms there, they loved to see her coming to visit her grandfather. Not because of the candy, though that was sweet, literally and metaphorically. Because, instead, Breanna witnessed to them about her faith in a loving God. She continues to visit with them, and show care for them, and be a sign of the resurrection and the life, even to this day. Even though the residents there may experience pain or osteoporosis or Parkinson's or Alzheimer's or congestive heart failure, there is a bit less anxiety about this life and the next.

Now Breanna Morey knows a lot about what Christ's resurrection means. She's living it. That's why I call this bag of candy which Breanna left for me, "Sweet, Sweet Resurrection Candy." She's living the resurrection and the life.

As is my mother-in-law Christine. As you know Christine had to evacuate out of New Orleans at the end of August as Hurricane Katrina approached. New Orleans is her home, beyond questioning or debate. New Orleans is the town she was born and raised in, where she was married, where her husband, Priscilla's father, Raymond Towles Reckling, died. Where she had spent, until this year, every Thanksgiving and every Christmas holiday of her life. And as spry as she looks, she has some maturity on her, 85 years of it. So you have to know something of the sense of loss she experienced. She's doing fine, though, so please no subtle or obvious expressions of pity, either of which she will shun in a nanosecond. She's living in a caring community, with plenty of activities and outings and contact with Priscilla and myself to suit her. And this is so, even as she attempts to soothe her grief over the losses, the deep, deep losses she has known since a horrifying hurricane swept away the livability of 285,000 homes in the greater New Orleans metropolis, including her own. Beyond her grief, and in keeping with her new life and her steadfast, forward-tilting inclination into the world, there is a look in her eyes. William Edwin Orchard, one of the greatest and most curious ecumenical Christians who ever drew breath called it "*this strange light in our eyes.*" Inasmuch as Orchard died before I was ever glint or glimmer in either of my parent's eyes, I was never able to ask Mr. Orchard straight away what he exactly meant. But it's meaning is there, it's rally plain after all, in the end. "*This strange light in our eyes*" is the resurrection look. And that's the look Christine has in her eyes. Beyond the debilitation of her house on Atherton Road. Beyond all the loss of connection and sense of place and grieving over the plight of those far worse off than she is, there's this look, this strange light, this light of "the resurrection and the life" in her eyes. And when I see it, I know not only that she's going to be all right, but that we all will be so with her, and that all will be well. I believe I've seen it in Breanna's eyes. And I've seen it in your eyes, too. When I see it, all I want to say is "*Hallelujah!*" And also "*Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed!*" So, "*Hallelujah!*" and "*Christ is risen! Christ is risen,*

*indeed!"* Happy Easter, and as we behold "this strange light in our eyes," please know that I love you. AMEN.

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