

## “THE HERE AND NOW”

“Death is no longer a downer,” proclaimed *USA Today*. “Death’s former finality has been upstaged by a new vision of afterlife in which the dearly departed can communicate with their loved ones, influence events, even come back to the mortal world for another go-round.” There have been a slew of bad movies, in my humble opinion, which espouse this view. *Buffy and the Vampire Slayer* features Buffy and her boyfriend Angel, who just won’t die. There was *Meet Joe Black*, and interminable movie about the delayed termination of a tycoon. In *What Dreams May Come*, Robin William’s is killed in a car crash but is incredibly reunited with his wife and kids and the family dog in a sort of German Romantic landscape. “The message is that love can survive death, that our mortality doesn’t doom us,” says scriptwriter Ron Bass. Even *Titanic*, a movie that took three hours to die, features Jack and Rose happy after all, despite Jack’s drowning, reunited on the grand staircase as if the whole thing was just a bad practical joke.

When Meryl Streep dared to die of cancer in *One True Thing* and actually leave her daughter behind, the movie bombed at the box office, giving credence to James Swanson’s idea of “the grandiose narcissism and impertinence of boomers...they’re determined that, for them, death will be different.” He calls it “Faith Lite.” Some think it all started with the death of Princess Di and the inconceivability that such a life could be cut short. She is Elton John’s “candle in the wind” that goes on forever. We just go on and on, immortal, like *Jack Frost*’s Michael Keaton in which a workaholic father, killed in a car crash, comes back as his son’s snowman. Give me a break. I have one thing to say about all this Hollywood immortality: none of it has anything to do with Easter.

On Good Friday we heard the passion story, and witnessed one candle after another being extinguished. We heard the stories of betrayal, again remembered the disciples denying they even knew Jesus, and recalled the tragic end of his short life. He did not appear to die. He was not asleep. He died a death more cruel and painful than can be imagined. He wasn’t dead for a moment on the operating room table having an out of body experience; he was dead, sealed in the tomb for three days. The disciples did not deceive themselves about his death. The one, whom they loved, in whom they had hoped, was dead.

The disciples got to that first Easter in great grief. They came to Jesus’ tomb with no cheap, false consolation about “his message will never die.” When they saw the tomb empty they didn’t think, “Jesus is immortal,” they thought, “Somebody stole his body.” There’s a lot of weeping, of real grief in the story as John tells it here in chapter 20. Tears are the appropriate response to the reality, the finality, the totality of death. Yet within a few days, they began to figure out what had happened. Israel believed that one day God was going to solve the problem of Israel’s suffering and oppression, and while God was at it, God would solve the problem of evil and injustice in the entire world. The scriptures promised such a day of divine victory. On Easter, the disciples discovered that day had come in the resurrection of Jesus. The cross, which they had thought was the end, the death of their relationship with Jesus, was really a new beginning.

John goes to some length to demonstrate that what happened to Jesus on Easter, while unexpected and strange, happened here, now. While it was still dark, Mary went to the tomb. The linen cloth is rolled carefully. Mary weeps. A man appears; she thinks him to be a gardener. And this is part of the mystery of resurrection. It is Jesus but she does not recognize him as such. It is not until he speaks to her that she recognizes him. He is not a corpse resuscitated. Yet according to the witness in the gospels, they recognize him bodily. He is not a ghost, a disembodied spirit, yet in one of the gospel stories he walks right through a door. The mystery is not the *who*, just the *how*. The meaning seemed obvious to these early followers. Jesus tackled the powers, religious and political powers; the powers didn’t like the challenge and tried to silence him. Resurrection was God’s resounding answer to the world’s power brokers. The disciples then had a new confidence that their suffering would never be in vain. They would continue the work, challenging the power which oppresses and robs men and women of life.

When Robert Fulghum, author of *All You Ever Need to Learn You Learned in Kindergarten*, was the graduation speaker at Syracuse University he led the graduates in a rousing rendition of “Itsy-Bitsy-Spider.” He said, “I don’t know how many of you have ever looked up a waterspout, but it’s very dark and dangerous-looking up there, scary, but there’s light showing. And the song says disaster occurred, down came the rain and washed the spider out. The song does not say: ‘And the spider said to hell with that and did something else.’ But, ‘Out came the sun and dried up all the rain and the itsy-bitsy spider went up the spout again.’” This, Fulghum claims should be the fight song of the human race! Will you fight to go up the spout again if you have concluded that life signifies nothing, that there is no faithfulness at the heart of things that all bets are off, all assumptions of meaning hopeless, all striving for mercy, justice, and peace in vain? No way. You will say, “To hell with that,” and go off doing something completely selfish.

But if your stance toward life is a decision to trust that existence is meaningful despite being washed down the spout every once and a while, then you’ll begin humming the fight song of the human race and start up the spout again. We cannot prove that the final word about our lives is gracious and the final power is love or that our lives are in reality, meaningful; but we here are living, and we can risk acting as if these assumptions are true. Do you want to know how to find faith: It’s simple, really. You begin acting as though you live in the presence of a living God; as though life is meaningful, as though justice matters, as though mercy will make a difference. You can succumb to helplessness or risk a course of action. It is point less to try to prove that Easter happened or how it happened because faith is about trusting. Faith is a leap.

Whatever resurrection is, it is about the here and now. It is about that encounter with the risen Christ that took a raggedy bunch of people and turned them into fireballs of energy. Part of what is so great about this story is who the disciples were. We need to remember that these were people as ordinary as they come. They weren’t the best and the brightest. They stumbled along after Jesus, confused most of the time. When pushed came to shove, they ran off. When asked to keep watch, to stay awake while Jesus prayed and prepared for the confrontation in Jerusalem, they fell asleep. When the first chance came to stand up for Jesus, they denied him. So what is resurrection about? It is about courage. It took tremendous guts to look up the water spout of Roman authority. Many were washed violently down that spout, but they didn’t say to hell with it. They climbed back up. They took Jesus at his word in the prayer “*Thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.*” They knew that Jesus wanted them to make a difference in the here and now. Whatever heaven is, whatever we can expect after we die, Easter is not concerned with that. Easter is about a God who would not let death and evil overcome the plan for heaven on earth.

We believe that this world matters. Resurrection is about God getting at last what God wants here, now, on earth, in these bodies. There is no pain we now face that is not transformed in the resurrection of Christ. Karl Marx called religion “an opiate for the masses.” He charged that Christianity lulls people into political complacency, willing to tolerate other people’s misery and injustice because Christianity has got nothing but heaven in its head, some future spiritual experience removed from the here and the now. No! Note that the first witnesses to Easter knew full well that something, something had happened to them. Their world had been entered, encountered, transformed, and reformed. Easter wasn’t God saying, “Let me get you out of this terrible deadly, tearful world. Easter was God saying, “Let me show you what I am doing to you and your world.”

Believing in the resurrection, to me at least, means believing that God is transforming our lives and the world. Believing in the resurrection means believing that like Jesus we can wade into the darkness trusting that there is a light on the other end. Walter Wink in *Engaging the Powers* writes, “Because they could not kill what was alive in him, the cross also revealed the impotence of death...Jesus at his crucifixion neither fights the darkness nor flees under cover of it, but goes with it, goes into it. He enters the darkness, freely voluntarily. The darkness is not dispelled or illuminated. It remains vast, untamed, and void. But he somehow encompasses it. It becomes the darkness of God. It is now possible to enter any darkness and trust God to wrest from it meaning, coherence, and resurrection.”

It happened on a bridge outside of Kansas City. A man had lost all hope and had gotten out of his car, climbing onto the outer framework. He was determined to jump. Traffic had come to a stop as people got out of their cars to watch the drama unfold. A police officer talked to him from above while another was putting on a harness with a long rope attached. The rope was attached to one of the squad cars. The talking continued as

the second officer lowered himself closer to the desperate man. Suddenly the man jumped---the officer jumped as well catching the man in mid air, wrapping his arms and legs around him in a tight embrace. They fell together until the rope ran out, snapped them to a halt and they swung back and forth over the river. Up on the bridge people heard the dangling officer yelling at the top of his lungs, "If you go, I go! I'm going to hold onto you until hell freezes over."

Wherever or whatever your life holds at the moment, know that this God of ours will never leave us. We are not only in God's hands, but embraced by "arms and legs" that will not let go until hell freezes over. That is the bottom line of resurrection. It did not protect Jesus, but embraced him beyond the pain, beyond death. It is a basic affirmation in life that cannot be undone by human evil and tragedy. That Easter message calls us to be the arms and legs embracing all humankind in that life-grip in the here and now---until hell freezes over!