

Feast of the Resurrection

Colossians 3:1ff

John 20:1ff & Mark 16:1ff

+In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.+

One of my father's first pastoral assignments as a deacon was to 4 small congregations making up a parish. They were in rural Northern Middle Tennessee. It was beautiful land of rolling hills and streams deep between those rises; it was green in the summer, explosive colors in the fall, snowy in winter (which meant getting out of school), and vibrant in spring. The people were rural and salt of the earth in the best sense of that term. He was paid sometimes in cash, and on others with country ham or pounds of tobacco to be sold. There were homes with no electricity or indoor plumbing, but the people were rich in communal life, sharing, love, and patience. Seldom have I seen the lack of judgmental attitudes toward others.

I had a friend, Alton, good natured and good hearted in one of those houses. The way of life was farming. I would stay overnight there, and we camped out under the watch of the hills and used his father's fenceposts for firewood!! (Not appreciated). You could see the Milky Way in its fullness. My first night out sounds emerged out of the darkness. Some were like whispers and others like full voices crying out. My imagination ran amok!! But Alton explained the wind in the trees gave soft tones and bobcats called in full voice. Voices—do you ever hear them?

Today there are 2 voices present and speaking. I don't mean the lay reader of the priest. In these historic Gospels they rise up and talk to us. One is the voice of death and loss seeking to seize control, and the other the voice of life which death cannot take.

Mark's telling of the great Paschal Mystery is the shortest, most compact, and perhaps most enigmatic of all 4 Gospels. There are 8 verses of narrative in all and the really strange aspect of the story is the conclusion. In Greek it ends in the preposition 'for' (gar) as if something else should follow, but the text stops at this point. I am not aware of any other place in Greek literature where this grammar exists. What's up here? Is something missing, as some scholars suggest, or is the Evangelist leading readers to wonder and dream about what it might mean of them (and us) if this story is true? Perhaps we are left to finish what this will mean for us.

Before Mark or John get to the Good News they lay before us the great and impenetrable truth; In this world death seems to hold court. Its grip is universal and unavoidable. Recall what the women say as they go to anoint the body of Jesus. (albeit a bit later than the norm). "Who will roll away the stone from the opening of the sepulcher? (The other 3 Gospels suggest the stone was rolled away by divine intervention, but in any case, the 'stone' represents something powerful!). Do you really think 3 people going to a sealed tomb would not have thought of this beforehand? This is not a logistical question; it is a human lament and quandary, and it is a theological foreshadowing. "WHO will roll away the stone—Indeed; no human agency of which we are aware. Who will ROLL away the stone—what action could possible meet the impenetrable roadblock to life? Who will roll away the stone from the TOMB—this is the great shadow cast over existence? The question is a reflection of the bad news we call death. I know we modern folk like to talk about death as a 'natural' part of life, but from our tradition and faith it is an intruder.

Let us for this moment and day mince no words or idle rhetoric. T.S. Eliot, the American-English poet and critic wrote: "The end is where we start from." "The end is where we start from." That is TRUE. How we understand, and more so, what we believe to be true about the end and

culmination of our lives determines how we will step and move in the days and years prior to that conclusion. Christians start with the conclusion!!

One voice proclaims that death reigns and there is nothing more. If death is the final act, the last word, then that is the shadow under which we will walk and live. Pope John Paul II spoke and wrote of “a culture of death”. What he was addressing can be seen in the taking of actions that view individual ‘rights’ as superseding any consideration of morality. Active euthanasia would be one area he considered. When I speak of a culture of death, what I intend is living as if this finite existence contains all that this is or will be and therefore, living with an often unspoken anxiety and fear that drives us to seek pleasure, success, achievement, self-fulfillment at any cost, because this will be all we are. The ending drives us.

This is the willingness to throw away dignity in pursuit of our own material well-being. In this time of the coronavirus crisis the fact that CEO's of corporations will take huge bonuses while leaving workers without income should make us shudder. If death is the defining moment and even, then all else will be relegated to its movement and shadow. It is out of fear of our finitude that we live.

We live in a culture that behaves in much this way and it shows in how we ‘manage’ death. My father died a couple of years ago rather unexpectedly. Due to the circumstances his body could not be donated to the medical school, so we dealt with a mortuary and their staff. They were most accommodating and helpful. Since I was not present when he died that asked if I wanted to view the body. With some reservation, I did. I was struck by how much effort and artistry had gone into trying to make it look as if he were not dead. It was a sort of pretending. I believe it is a testament to the power of death and our desire to avoid or move around it, but...we cannot.

Listen very carefully. Listen to the Scriptures, the liturgy, the hymns (if we were here to sing), the prayers, and the long proclamation of the Church. You will hear a Second Voice saying, “He is not here; He is risen...Why do you seek the living among the dead?” Easter is God's never depleted love for those made in His image—That is the WHO addressing death and giving life!! The words, ‘He is not here’ means He is not held by death. I know our culture likes to think of God as some passive old man who is a softy and pats us on the head when we stumble. That is not the picture presented here. This is a God who is willing to fight and fight forcefully for what is his. St. John Chrysostom said, “Hell took a body and discovered God. It took earth and encountered heaven. It took what it saw and was overcome by what it did not see.” This second voice is Easter-Pascha-it is THE culture of life. Yes, the resurrection is about our existence and about our own physical deaths. It is about the God who will not be outfoxed by finitude, fear, suffering; by death.

In truth our lives as Christians are already about smaller deaths and resurrections, and these can be a prelude to something greater and more meaningful. When we are moved to get a new mind (repentance) and give up habits that limit and sometimes destroy us. When we have a broken relationship where we are finally moved to go beyond our pain and anger and forgive, and just perhaps, a whole new relationship comes to emerge from the sepulcher. Each of these are signs of life over death; of the power of the resurrection. It is a pattern built into God' intent for all of creation. When we start to trust that life is truly in God's hands and when we allow that to guide us through fear or trepidation, we are living by hearing that second voice. The resurrection has made its mark on us.

The voice we need to hear corrects our miscalculations and misperceptions about WHO is really holding us. In Valladolid Spain, the city where Columbus died in 1506, there is a striking sculpture in one of the city squares. It is a globe with a banner on which is the motto of the country. Originally that motto was Ne Plus Ultra, or Nothing Else Beyond. It reflected the belief that Spain had seen all there was to see, until...Columbus sailed off and someone noticed the mast of the ship sinking which indicated the world was spherical or round. (it had been surmised earlier in history as well). Sorry, flat earthers! But after the expansion out of Europe and the realization that much lay across the oceans, the Spanish had the sculpture made with a lion claws extended taking out the 'Ne', the negative, thus leaving More Beyond. That is what today is about.

The Gospels tell us that in spite of their fear the women announce the unexpected and explosive gift that life has conquered death. That Ending is really the Beginning. Amen+