

**L’Inconnue de la Seine**  
**Easter Day, Year B**  
**8 April 2012**  
**By The Reverend Barkley Thompson**

This morning I want to tell you a story.<sup>1</sup> It is a story of beauty, romance, mystery, perhaps of murder, of toymakers, and a drowning child, and most importantly of death. It is not the story you came this morning expecting to hear, but it is connected to that story. I promise.

In 1880 the body of a young woman, no older than her early twenties, was pulled from the River Seine in Paris. She might have been murdered, but there were no signs of struggle or other markings on her body, and so it was assumed she had jumped from a bridge. Somehow the rumor arose that her lover had left her, and in her despondency she had committed suicide. Oddly, though, neither did her body show the tell-tale signs of drowning—she was not bloated or discolored—so perhaps the lover killed her by some undetectable means and then dumped her body in the river.

Either way, the young woman was taken to the city morgue behind Notre Dame. Because her identity was unknown, the morgue followed the practice of the day and set her in the front window so that passers-by could see her, in hopes that she would be recognized and her body claimed. (That may sound macabre, but since we are a culture obsessed with television shows like Crime Scene Investigators, we really shouldn’t cast stones!)

Here’s the thing: the young woman was beautiful, and she became a sensation. Crowds gathered outside the morgue to see her, wondering who she might be and how she died, and wishing that there were some way to bring her back to life and hear her story. Soon an enterprising young mortician realized that the woman, who almost immediately was called “L’Inconnue de la Seine,” the “Unknown Woman of the Seine,” was marketable. At the turn of the century fashionable Europeans adorned their parlor walls with replica plaster death masks of famous artists, composers and statesmen. The mortician sent for a local mask maker to come and cast a death mask of L’Inconnue. Soon the half-smiling visage of the unknown beauty was everywhere. Hundreds of replica masks were made. The woman’s mysterious story spread across the continent, and she hung on walls next to Mozart, Napoleon, and Abraham Lincoln. Over the years poets and bards ranging from Rilke to Nabokov found themselves transfixed

when they were first exposed to the face of L’Inconnue. They wrote about her yearningly, wishing she could open her eyes and breathe life.

Some seventy years later, an Austrian toymaker’s little boy almost drowned in the ocean, and in consequence the toymaker teamed up with a physician named Peter Safar, who had recently invented the technique for CPR. Dr. Safar wanted to be able to teach chest compressions and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation widely, but in order to do so he needed a training mannequin that he could mass-produce. The very thought of providing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation upon strangers was off-putting to most, and Safar understood that the mannequin must overcome the stigma by being attractive and even enticing to those being trained. Safar went to the toymaker for help with the design. But there was no conundrum for the toymaker. He immediately knew who would be the mannequin’s face.

The toymaker, like so many others over the years, had been stopped in his tracks the first time he’d gazed upon the placid, beautiful death mask of the Unknown Woman of the Seine. He took that mask and used it as the mold for the mannequin’s face. In 1960 the first “Resusci Anne” was produced. That Resusci Anne, and every one made since then, has the face of L’Inconnue de la Seine, the Unknown Woman of the Seine. In the past fifty years, *three-hundred million* people have been trained on the Resusci Anne doll. Three hundred million people have breathed into the mouth of the Unknown Woman of the Seine.

Journalist Jad Abumrad says, “It’s like over and over and over again, [like Nabakov and Rilke before them], thousands and thousands of people are trying to bring this woman back to life.”

What an image on this Easter Day: Beauty, captured in youth by a mask maker’s plaster, always *beyond* our striving to give life. We can remember her; we can beg questions of her; we can even use her visage to preserve life where it still flickers; but we cannot bring back the dead. Three hundred million people may try—the whole world may try—but the mysterious life lost in 1880 is gone. No human striving can bring the dead to life. Death is death, and the dead are dead.

That is the promise, sure and certain, of which we were reminded last Friday, when Jesus was nailed to the cross, when the soldiers pierced his side to make sure he was dead. It’s even the promise with which this day began when still in darkness. The two Marys and Salome went to the tomb to anoint a corpse. They *had* believed in Jesus, but this morning they believed in

death. “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” they asked. A dead man certainly cannot roll a stone from the inside of his own crypt.

And yet, “when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.” The young man sitting in the tomb says to them, “*He is not here; he has been raised.*”

No human striving can bring the dead to life. That is true. But on Easter Day, God acts where humanity is impotent to act. In another story of mystery and murder, in another life of beauty and love that captivates hundreds of millions, the death mask is *not* the final word. Where humanity cannot resuscitate, God *resurrects*. In Jesus, death is not death. The dead is not dead. When the women enter the tomb, Jesus is not only alive, he has gone on ahead of them, ready to meet them in Galilee.

In the other Gospels, this news is met with wonder and joy. But this year we read Mark, and Mark ends by saying, “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

That seems to us a weird ending. From the comfort of twenty-first century pews we wonder about the women’s reaction. But then again, lest we forget, we take some comfort in the certainty of death. Death is, ultimately, a bookend to life, the one thing (besides taxes, the old joke goes) we can count on. Now, though we *can’t* count on it. Now, *beyond* death, Jesus is *out there*, calling us to follow him not just today and not just next year but *forever*. We are called *out of* this life, *through* death, and *into* Resurrection. It’s a little scary to be given something so radically new.

But it is the new promise, more certain and sure than death. It is the surprise ending to the mystery, the resolution of the love affair, the “wow moment” at the end of the story. God breathes into *us*, and his breath is Resurrection. Jesus is not dead. He is risen! And he calls us forward, to shatter our death masks and live.

*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> The details of L’Inconnue de la Seine, including the quote from Jad Abumrad, come from the November 29, 2011, podcast of WNYC’s “Radiolab.”