

An Invitation to Life

From the series: A Fresh Look at an Ancient Story

Scripture: Psalm 16:5-11; 1 Peter 1:3-9, 19-29; John 5:1-9 Text: John 5:24

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
Easter Sunday, April 15, 2001

Transcription of the spoken sermon

There is a lot available to you today and tonight on Easter and Jesus - television specials and programs, one dealing with the face of Christ. Apparently there is an archeologist that has studied Jewish skulls going back through all the diggings, a couple of thousand of them, and then a medical artist whose specialty is putting flesh to bone, and now there is another head of Jesus to compete with Salman's "Head of Christ," which is so famous in our experience.

Last year the *National Catholic Reporter* had a contest for the image of Jesus for the Third Millennium, and the winner was a woman by the name of Janet MacKenzie who painted an African American woman, and, of course, that caused a little bit of stir among the faithful. But her point, of course, was Jesus as the liberator in that image, and what was being conveyed was that there are still those who need to be freed, liberated. So, there is going to be this long special about images of Christ tonight.

There is another one, "The Face of Christ in Art," and in all of these it is interesting that we should be concerned about it, if we are, because as I reflected on it in terms of Easter this morning, I was struck by the fact that the important thing is not what Jesus looked like, but that he was, indeed, human. That is the critical matter.

I say that in the light of our understanding of the reality of which we are a part. A cosmic process that they tell us has been going on for some 15 billion years, perhaps, and that that cosmic process with all of the complexity and all of the fascination of that development should issue in creatures like us, human beings, human beings who are conscious and aware, who give the universe a voice, creatures who are able to reflect on that whole process, and to wonder at it, that among those human beings there should have been one Jesus, the Christ. Now, that is amazing. If you want to speak of miracle, that is a miracle, that this process has eventuated in the human and that, among the humans, there should have been one Jesus. That is the wonder of it all and that is the critical matter,

not what he looked like, but that he was genuinely bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh.

You might have already seen this weekend another television special that is created by the Coral Ridge Ministries. I have made reference to it an earlier time when I saw it, perhaps around the Christmas season, about who is this real Jesus. This is produced by D. James Kennedy, and if you would catch that you will see that the concern about what Jesus looked like is not evident at all. There is no concern. But there is a concern and that is the factuality of the resurrection, that Jesus who was crucified, as a matter of fact, walked out of the tomb. This word "fact" comes through often. The point is, of course, in this evangelical understanding of the Easter miracle, that it was Jesus who died as the sin-bearer for the world, who was raised by God as an indication that that sin offering was accepted, and, if you would watch that video, it will conclude with the Sinner's Prayer where you will acknowledge that you are a sinner, that you believe that Christ died for your sin, and that you ask for forgiveness and claim the promise, then, of heaven. That, of course, is the old, traditional conception of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. So, you can see that tonight, too, and that still speaks to millions and millions of people.

I was reminded of the fact that when I went to Europe in 1967 the resurrection was the hot topic. There had been 100 years of European scholarship in which no one hardly dared speak about the resurrection. There was still the impact of the Enlightenment and miracle was not one of the possibilities, and so certainly no one dared speak about the resurrection of Jesus. But, about the time I got there, there was a whole class of students who were the students of the great Barth and Bultmann, and they were beginning to think again and speak again about the resurrection, and that the New Testament really could not be understood apart from the resurrection, and their emphasis, what they had hold of, was not like the Coral Ridge video— Jesus dying for sin and being raised again— but rather, Jesus being raised in the midst of history as the illuminator of history, and I can remember how powerful that was at the time. A theologian named Moltmann spoke about the theology of hope, and there was this whole emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus as the sign of the future consummation and all of the promises of God would be realized, and the kingdom of God would come fully into view. That was an important moment for me, frankly, personally, that resurrection in the midst of history. In fact, I came back to this congregation in 1971 under false pretenses. They thought I was the same one that left in 1964 but, anyway, the one thing that I did say to them early on was "Give me Jesus and the resurrection, and the rest is negotiable."

As I have been thinking about Easter 2001 and this morning, I realize that my conception of things continues to grow, my sense of God, my appreciation for Jesus, and my sense of what the whole cosmic drama is about, so that it is not that sin offering and it is not even the fact that in the midst of history there is a sign of history's ultimate culmination. As I thought about it, the important thing

for me is that life of Jesus, as I said a moment ago, that in the course of this cosmic process, out of this tapestry of swirling energy there should have arisen, not only a human being, but one like Jesus. And as I thought about it, I realized that Easter at one time for me meant the solution to the problem of death, and the resurrection of Jesus was to be celebrated because it signed the conquering of death. But, that isn't nearly so important for me today. What is really important is that life, that life that was lived in the midst of our history, that life that confronted power with truth, that spoke truth to power, that spoke against all systems of domination and oppression, that life that revealed the heart of God full of mercy and compassion, that spoke for justice and equity. Jesus, that magnificent life - that is the important thing: that he died trusting God, of course, but that he lived out a vision, the vision of what he believed was the divine intention. That is the amazing thing to me today.

And then, as I thought about that, the question came: "Well, then, what is Easter?" Easter is what happened when his followers had the same experience I did. After the disappointment of his death, the fear and their fading into the woodwork, they began to come together again, and they said, "My God! He's still with us. He's alive. He's alive with God, and he is present with us." What they began to see was that what he was is what God is, and they knew that what he was, which is what God is, can never finally be defeated, can never finally be executed, can never finally be rubbed out. For one way or another, in one form or another, what Jesus was was a reflection of the divine intention. It was a reflection of that love and that mystery at the heart of things, and you can crucify it, you can execute it, you can try to put it away, you can stamp it out only so long, and it rises again. What he was is what God is, the divine Lover, the divine Intention, the Sacred at the center of things that will not be defeated, that will not finally be overcome.

That is why we live with an indomitable hope. That is why we have this annual celebration, this affirmation of faith that all the wonder and the beauty and the truth, the integrity and the magnificence of that one life can never be overcome, never be defeated, never finally be put out, for the light will shine in the darkness and continue to shine, and finally, no matter how dark the abyss, life will return and Jesus is an invitation to life. You can get all of the images in the scripture, you can get the Coral Ridge image, you can get the Hope and History image, and even in John's gospel there is that paragraph back to back, the word of Jesus that gives life to the dead, some of them the living dead. And in the next paragraph, the dead in the tomb. It is all there, all of the images are there, all of the scenarios are there. But, for me, on this Easter, I celebrate Easter because of the life of Jesus and what he was is what God is, and that is why I follow him. Not because he died, but because he lived, and when I come to this table, I take bread and cup in order that I may be in solidarity with him and, taking bread and cup, I receive that promise that, to the end of the age, he will be with me. The lure of love at the heart of things came to expression in one Jesus. Now, there's a life and an invitation to true living.