

He Lives, We Live, Alleluia!
From the sermon series: The Human Face of God

Text: John 14:19

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan

Easter Sunday, April 19, 1987

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Because I live, you too shall live. John 14:19

"This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!"

This is the Lord's Day, the Lord's Day of which every first day of the week is a joyful celebration. This is Easter; Christ is risen from the dead. The word from the Gospel for our celebration today is

Because I live, you too shall live.

It is a simple text; just seven words. You can carry it home with you; you can take it with you through Eastertide; you can take it with you throughout all the seasons of your life; it will give you confidence in your youth, courage in life's middle years, peace at the end; you can take this text to your death, repeating it as you move through the valley of the shadow, into the momentary darkness and into the brightness of the light that will greet you, light streaming from his countenance who spoke this simple, straightforward word. Jesus said:

Because I live, you too shall live.

Today we focus sharply on the very center of our Christian faith and hope. On Easter we celebrate and rejoice in the final Truth, the last word of our faith:

He lives, we live, Alleluia!

Today we celebrate the center from which our every Christian celebration stems, the reason why there is any cause at all in this world, in our human condition, to celebrate.

Let me set forth but two thoughts around which to center our Easter celebration: the foundation of our celebration, and the reality that we celebrate.

The Foundation

The foundation of our Easter celebration is the truth clearly and simply set forth in our text, the claim of Jesus, "I live."

That is the great Easter reality. Jesus lives. It is the proclamation of the Gospel story. It was the overwhelming revelation to Mary in the Garden when, in gentle grace, he called her by name. It is the declaration of St. Paul in perhaps the earliest Easter document, the first Corinthian letter, where he declares,

... the truth is, Christ was raised to life.

In simplest, most concise terms, Jesus says,

I live.

Perhaps you were surprised to find the Easter text taken from the Last Discourse with its setting at the Last Supper. That discourse begins with the 13th chapter of John, the moving scene of last supper during which Jesus girded himself with a towel and washed his disciples' feet. Death was at the door; Judas was dismissed. John tells us movingly, "It was night." It was in such a setting that the words of our text were uttered. They appear in a paragraph where Jesus is preparing the disciples for his absence. He assures them that they will not be left desolate, bereft; rather, he will come back to them. Then we hear him say,

Because I live, you too will live.

How are we to understand these words placed by John in this solemn setting on the eve of crucifixion? Was Jesus aware of Easter before ever he endured Good Friday? Traditionally, the Church has attributed such foreknowledge to him but, I think, wrongly.

One thing we can be quite certain of: Jesus knew the end had come; his "hour" had arrived. And further, we can be quite certain that he was confident that God would effect His purposes through life or death. And further, should it be death, still Jesus placed his trust in the Father.

But if you ask why I choose a text from the Last Discourse as an Easter text, let me remind you that the whole Gospel and each of the four gospels are Post-Easter texts in their entirety. If, as we assume, John's Gospel is the latest of the Gospels to appear, then the Christian community had been living in the light of Easter for several decades. By this time the whole of Jesus' life and all the words remembered that he spoke were understood in the light of Easter.

A study of the Last Discourse will show that it is really made up of several pieces of tradition. If, for example, you compare John 13:31 - 14:31 with John 16:4b-33, you will find that they are parallel passages, no doubt remembrances of the same

discourse of Jesus stemming from different circles and different times in the developing tradition.

There are commentators who go so far as to call these discourses Post-Easter conversations of the risen Christ with his disciples. That is probably not the case, but there is no doubt that these chapters contain various time perspectives and some of the statements appear to be made in the light of the Easter experience and the presence of the Spirit. They reflect the reality of the Post-Easter Christian community.

The only point I wish to make out of all of this is that what in the chronology of the Gospel of John appears to be a pre-Easter statement is really a Gospel proclamation in the wake of the Easter experience. Raymond Brown, in his great commentary on John, writes,

Although he speaks at the Last Supper, he is really speaking from heaven; although those who hear him are his disciples, his words are directed to Christians of all times. The last discourse is Jesus' last testament: it is meant to be read after he has left earth. Yet it is not like other last testaments, which are the recorded words of men who are dead and can speak no more; ... the Last Discourse has been transformed in the light of the resurrection and through the coming of the Paraclete into a living discourse delivered, not by a dead man, but by the one who has life ... (p. 582)

C.H. Dodd writes:

It is true that the dramatic setting is that of the night in which he was betrayed, with the crucifixion in prospect. Yet in a real sense, it is the risen and glorified Christ who spoke.

Brown explains this rather strange mixture of present and future as follows:

The Last Discourse explains the significance and implications of the greatest of Jesus' deeds, namely, his return to the Father; but it precedes what it explains. The reason ... is easy to see: it would be awkward to interrupt the action of the passion, death, and resurrection, and it would be anticlimactic to place so long a discourse after the resurrection. (p. 581)

Having explained how such a statement as our text appears in a pre-Easter setting, I want now to examine the foundation of our celebration - Jesus' declaration,

I Live.

Who makes this claim? It is Jesus, the man of Nazareth whose passion we have traced in these past weeks of Lenten observance. It is Jesus our brother, flesh of

our flesh and bone of our bone. It is Jesus, the human covenant partner of the faithful covenant-keeping God. It is Jesus whom Paul calls the last Adam in contrast to the first Adam.

In sum: resurrection happened to a fully human person; it was God's mighty act, but the action was worked on Jesus, a human person who had been "made like these his brothers of his in every way," to quote the writer to the Hebrews from whom we took our text on Passion Sunday.

Our Lenten pilgrimage began around the Table and the text affirmed the mystery of our salvation: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself." God was in Christ. God was in this thing from the beginning, from eternity, in the conception and birth, in the life and in the death, but the one in whom God was fully present and active was the man Jesus.

Our whole understanding of Jesus, of God's action in him, of the salvation accomplished through him comes from the New Testament, all of which was written a good while after that first Easter - a perspective from which the Early Church was fully convinced that God was in this thing. In order to witness to that Truth and to proclaim that Truth, Jesus was given every conceivable title of honor and dignity. There was no doubt that God was fully present to, active in, working through Jesus and when the creeds were formulated in the subsequent centuries, the way the Church gave expression to its understanding was to point to Jesus and say,

True God, true man.

And in the history of the Church, the "True God" soon overshadowed the true man.

But we have followed a different tack these Lenten weeks. We have attempted to see him "from below" in the genuine human existence he lived out. We have attempted to see him as our brother - in fear and trembling before the "hour," determined fully to follow the will of the Father in costly obedience, setting us an example that we should follow in his steps. This Jesus: made in every way like us, the Jesus whom Mary did not know how to love, the Jesus who wrestled in anguish only finally to say, "Thy will be done," the Jesus who with disarming vulnerability faced down the alignment of worldly power determined to maintain its position by fear, coercion and intimidation.

If we have done justice to the portrait of the man as the New Testament still portrays him, even through the overlay of deity ascribed to him, then Easter is really something to shout about because then a man has risen from the dead, then a human person has conquered death through the mighty power of God.

Now, that's a miracle!

This is no God-man with an ace up his sleeve who couldn't die anyway because he was God.

Don't tell me about a God-man whom death could not conquer. That would be no miracle. Then Jesus was only a masquerade. Then he *seemed* human, but was not really our brother. Then one can say God was here and death could not touch him, but one cannot say a fully human person was here and he conquered death by the power of God, Whose will he fully followed and to Whose care he trustingly committed himself.

The glory of Easter is that God raised up one like ourselves, that in a fully human existence, death has been conquered. Jesus said,

"I live."

That is more than I exist; that is, "I am alive with the vitality of God, the source of life, and consequently, because I live, you, too, shall live!"

The Reality We Celebrate

The reality we celebrate today is that we, too, shall live. That is, that we are enlivened with the vitality of the resurrected Christ and that we now are alive with the life of God and we shall move through the moment of death into a fuller, richer dimension of life forevermore. The biblical term, the great theme of John's Gospel, is Eternal Life – life in a new dimension. Union with Jesus through faith was for John the union with God that was the source of life in a new dimension – eternal life – a present possession and an even more wonderful reality yet awaiting us beyond the terminus of death.

You, too, shall live.

That is the transforming consequence of the great Easter event. He lives, we live, Alleluia!

Again, let me stress, we are not speaking of the mere perpetuation of life, the mere extension of some kind of biological existence. It is not simply to have more of living "at this poor dying rate." Although there is a strong, natural drive to live, to keep alive, it is also true that life can become a burden. Last evening my aunt told me of an uncle who said to her yesterday, "How I wish the Lord would take me home." That is not a rare desire. He, who was full of life and loved to travel and loved to have half a dozen children crawling over him at one time, has been wounded by a stroke. Emotions are out of sync, the mind goes out of focus, the motor skills are damaged, and he who always cared for others is now the object of care, handicapped, crippled, a bird with broken wing whose song is silenced.

You, too, shall live!

But not in the limitation, brokenness and tragedy of this present experience. We shall LIVE; that is, we are now and we shall be more so, alive with the very life of God, this vitality by which he powerfully raised Jesus from the dead.

In the first letter of John, the wonder of what we are now and the anticipation of what we shall be is beautifully experienced.

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us that we should be called the children of God; and such we are now and we know not what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is.

Now! The present possession of life is the gift of the risen Lord and there is still more to come.

In an Easter letter from prison, Bonhoeffer contrasts Socrates and Jesus. Socrates mastered the art of dying. Jesus conquered death. The first is within human capacity; the latter implies resurrection.

The Easter message is a message of radical renewal. What we celebrate today is not just the return of a dead person to life, but the death of death, the conquest of death, the last evening and therefore the triumph of grace in the whole cosmos, the very victory of God over every obstacle, all darkness, every tragedy and all suffering.

The resplendent strains of triumph reverberate down the post Easter decades of the Early Church. Paul writes nothing, nothing, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. He breaks out in triumphant acclamation,

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Socrates mastered the art of dying. One of philosophical bent can come to terms with almost any situation or condition. One can, with discipline and concentration and contemplation, come to a measure of peace in any storm - at least some seem to; that was true of Socrates - he mastered the art of dying.

But Jesus conquered death. Socrates calmly drank the hemlock. Jesus anguished before the moment of evil's assault. Jesus wept. Jesus cried for release. Jesus felt utter desolation.

Socrates died; nothing changed.

Jesus died and then God changed everything.

Jesus conquered death through the mighty power of God and therefore it is he who addresses us on each recurring Lord's Day, each First Day of the Week, with the assuring words,

Because I live you, too, shall live.

We shall live, my friends - live beyond a mean and selfish extension of this present scene; live beyond the dis-ease, the restless anxiety, the broken down and disappointed hope; live beyond the gaping wounds of denial and betrayal; live beyond the weakness of our mortal bodies vulnerable to sickness and crippling disability.

We shall live in love in communion with Jesus, in union with God in the eternal praise of His glory.