

The Truth That Will Not Die

Easter Sunday

Psalm 82; I Corinthians 15:12-29; Matthew 27:50-54

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Have you ever wondered where the idea of resurrection came from, where the thought arose? Actually, I suppose the question which is given classic form in the Hebrew drama of Job says it well: "If one die, will one live again?" That question probably arose in the very dawning beginnings of the human experience, the beginning of consciousness, self-consciousness, consciousness of myself and consciousness of another, and the beginnings of human relationship, and then one day the breath goes out of the other, the spirit leaves and there is death, and the mystery of death would eventually cause a thoughtful, human consciousness to say, "If one dies, will one live again?" What is this mystery of life and of death?

But, actually, that endemic, human question has nothing to do, really, with resurrection. Resurrection finds its birth, its advent in Second Temple Judaism, the late centuries just before the birth of Jesus. Actually, the Torah, the five books of Moses, knows nothing of resurrection or deals at all with whatever there may be in life beyond this life. The common phrase is, "And he was gathered to his fathers," which I suppose was an expression of trusting at death as one had trusted God in life. But the situation of the Jewish people in Judah became severe due to the brutality of the Roman occupation and, prior to that, the persecution under the Syrian empire of Antiochus IV. Those awful experiences in the first couple of centuries before the birth of Jesus created a growing conviction that those righteous martyrs who suffered because of their faithfulness to God, who died because of their commitment to the covenant, would surely rise again. It wasn't the Greek immortality of the soul, an ongoing existence of the soul, but it was a bodily resurrection that was conceived of, and it was a bodily resurrection because in the body they had suffered, and the body had been put to death, and those experiencing that brutality, experiencing the loss of the righteous martyrs, began to speak of resurrection, a general resurrection when the righteous martyrs would come forth from the grave, bodily.

What gave them the idea? The idea stems from the fact that the God of Israel is a God of justice, and in the face of persecution and suffering and the loss of these faithful ones, the question was asked: If God is just, will they not come forth

again, for their life was cut short, their life was cut off? It is in that context that the idea of a bodily resurrection or the resurrection of the dead emerged. And again, it emerged not primarily because of the martyrs, but primarily because of the conception of God.

Psalm 82 was read today. It is as though Israel's God holds a council of all the gods of the nations and God charges them with the failure to bring justice to the world, and God dismisses them and says, "Your time is over because you have failed to effect justice on the earth and, consequently, the very foundations of the earth are shaken." It was the Psalmist's conviction, reflecting a deep strain of Jewish faith that justice must prevail and where there is injustice, creation itself is brought into instability, and so the 82nd Psalm dismisses the gods of the nations for their failure and ends with a prayer to the God of Israel, "Come, o Lord, and judge the world, judge the nations, bring judgment, bring justice to bear." This was the deep conviction of Israel; it was the character of Israel's God and, consequent upon that, these righteous ones who died for their faith could not simply be left dead.

There is a theme in the Hebrew Scriptures which is repeated over and over again. It is the theme of persecution and vindication. It is a very strong theme that one can trace through the Psalms and through the prophets. Persecution, vindication, with vindication taking place in this life, in this world. It was to be a vindication before the enemies. Daniel is thrown into the lions' den for his faithfulness, and God stops the mouth of the lion and saves Daniel. Queen Esther rescues her people from a conspiracy to bring them to annihilation and the adversary. The enemy is judged and brought to ruin. That theme of persecution and vindication ran strong in the Hebrew scriptures because of the conviction that God was God and God was good and God was just, and God was the living God and, consequently, God could not tolerate that kind of situation to go unmarked. There is the origin of the idea of the resurrection of the body.

What will we do with it today? You found a piece of it already in Matthew's Gospel that was read. At the death of Jesus, people come out of their tombs. Now, Matthew had a little problem. He's obviously putting a couple of traditions together and it doesn't really make sense, to be honest, because they come out of the tomb at the death of Jesus but they have to sort of sneak around in the bushes until Sunday morning because they can't perceive Jesus. They show themselves at the resurrection, but they come out of the tombs at the crucifixion, and that is a reflection of this idea that's deeply written in those centuries just prior to Jesus' death, that the righteous ones would certainly be vindicated by God.

But, what will we do with it? Paul assumed that with Jesus' resurrection the final, general resurrection would follow very soon. Everything seemed to hinge on that for Paul and, of course, as we know, it has not yet come 2000 years later. So, what do we do 2000 years later with this wonderful conception of the justice of God causing the vindication of the righteous dead?

Well, the world is a lot bigger for us than it was for the writers of the scripture. We know that we are engaged in a cosmic process of some 15 billion years. We know that we are the end products of that 15-billion year unfolding and that we live at the very fraction of the last second of that whole process. We know that we are quite amazing. We are, you know. Here we are on an Easter Sunday morning contemplating together our life, our existence, our death, and if there's anything more. Spirit has emerged and the human has become a spiritual being living in community, and what a wonder is this human existence. What a gift. What a marvel it is to encounter, here and there, the grace of life.

There was a moment here last night as the Easter Vigil finished. It was rather chaotic with flowers all over the place, and there was a child barely a year old, Meika, whose mother brought her and sat her right here, on the steps of the chancel. She sat there like a little queen, with a long-stemmed tulip across her lap, and her picture was taken. I suppose that Nancy got that picture, too, and it will be on the bulletin board one of these days. A beautiful child.

Have you ever stopped to wonder in the face of a child? Have you ever stopped to wonder in the face of the other in whom love dwells? Do we take time to be aware of the marvel of the human story? What are we going to do with this story that we are living and that we are experiencing? I rather think that in the Christian church what we have done with resurrection is move it from that vindication of the suffering righteous to simply life at another place and another time. I think we have lost that corporate community sense in which the justice of God was called in on behalf of those who died for their faith and we have made it our own personal excursion into some realms beyond and, in so doing, we have lost its footage. In so doing, we have lost the message that it was initially meant to convey.

But, what are we going to do with it? What of Job's question, for it's your question and mine, as well: "If a man die, will he live again?"

I don't think we can treat it the way the biblical writers did in terms of expecting God, somehow or another, to come in and "fix it." Could we dare hope for that? Expect that, after the Holocaust when the heavens were silent and God unmoved to action? Have we not learned in our human experience that the God of Israel is the God of justice who, in response to our question, "How long, o Lord, how long?" says to us, "How long, O people, how long?" Are we not called to the transformation of the world?

You see, if we make resurrection just some personal excursion into the realms beyond after death, if we wait somehow or other for God to move the gears of the universe, then another Holocaust could occur. But, if we could only get a sense that the justice of God that came to expression in that Hebrew prophet Jesus is about world transformation and that God looks for us to change our world, then we could live fully. We could be totally engaged; we could love wildly, and we could give ourselves for the transformation of our world and, living fully, trusting

God, we could die well after a life full of meaning, full of significant engagement. And then, who is to say -after fifteen billion years - are we the climax of it all? Would that not be an arrogant assertion? Fifteen billion years and here we are, in the wonder of life, in the amazement of grace, in the beauty of human community. But, who knows? Who knows what yet may be? Who would say that this is all there is?

In the light of the God of Jesus, the Jesus who embodied the God of justice, the God of Israel, I can live with meaning and significance *now*, and die in peace, full of hope, full of trust... waiting for just one more surprise.