

Easter

1 Corinthians 15: 20 – 22, Ephesians 2: 1-2, 4–6, 8-10

Makemie Presbyterian Church

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But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

Ephesians 2: beginning in the first verse.

And you, Jesus made alive, even though you were dead through your trespasses and sins, because you walked according to the course of this world...But God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which God loves us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised up with him and seated with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved by faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God. For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

This ends our reading.

What is Easter? The Bible answers: resurrection, resurrection of Jesus from the dead; and that means: the living God, forgiveness of sins, the empty tomb, conquered death; -- Jesus wins, Jesus is victor.

But really are these answers? Answers we understand. Answers that do something? Are these clear, plain, understandable words? Or are these words hard to understand?

So that we say to ourselves,

“We have had enough of these old odd questions, these puzzles of life. We don’t care to deal with these old, or even with these new questions. Life is hard and dismal. We have little enough light and we come to church that we might receive more light. So that the little light we have might not be stolen from us.”

Maybe we are deep in doubt. We don’t understand ourselves, and we sure don’t understand life in general. We are afraid of life. There are so many dark shadows around us that we can scarcely find our way. Is there really a way out? Does life have meaning? And along comes Easter and says,

“God, the living God, exists. God lives. God triumphs.”

Yes, that's the statement. And we reply; "It is with this understanding that I struggle. That's what I don't understand and no assumption of the Bible or of a preacher helps me over my difficulties. The darkness becomes extreme. The questions start to burn like a new wound. The living God – if only I could grasp & understand that. If that would just speak to me."

Or maybe you're not a brooding person. Your situation is different. You're active, or, at least, ambitious. A progressive person. But you chafe beneath your failures & weaknesses, and with all your progress they still cling to you. Maybe you have lived for years under the curse of a moral trespass. And no one knows why you secretly slip back into your old faults and feel so ashamed of yourself. Maybe others know about it; and they still see it on you. Anyway, it's a curse, an imprisonment in which you are held. You know, "there is a worm eating at the root of my life, and it disturbs whatever might grow out of these roots."

You don't know how to be done with it. You – your better self— is bound with chains to another part of yourself, which you detest, and yet you can't shake it off, because it seems to belong to you. You miserable person, who will deliver you from the body of this death?

And here comes Easter and says,

“Forgiveness of sins. Broken chains. If God is for us, who can be against us?”

“Yes”, (you sigh), “how wonderful it would be, but it is just my burden, my misery, that I don’t experience anything like that. This shout of joy can’t well up out of my own experience any more. Let shout who will, but rejoicing isn’t for me. On the contrary; forgiveness means freedom, and I discover what chains and fences really are when we speak of freedom.”

Or, finally: We must die. The untold moment will come for us all, and when the end comes, at the place where this world sinks away and where we bid farewell to the realities of this life with all of its lights and shades. Where do we go then? What is left of us? From our position we can answer nothing. As far as our human thinking and living is concerned, that is the last word. A grave mound, a few frail flowers, that’s all that is left. And yet, again Easter comes and speaks the word our hears can’t hear, about the conquest of death, the empty grave; and this word is for us the hardest to hear, and the hardest to believe. Who can understand it? Where all ends, there all really begins? Aren’t we tempted to shout, “Oh stop, stick a fork in

me; we're done once and for all with this terrible enigma of dying. You just rip open old wounds when you talk, talk, talk of it.”

(But) doesn't Easter mean Jesus wins? Jesus. Isn't it Jesus who was born in humble lowliness, who died on the cross crying the cry of a derelict God; Jesus who forgave sins but who collapsed under the burden of sin. Jesus the humble, gripped by his fate; and now all those laden with grief, isn't Jesus the most burdened man of Nazareth? And Jesus wins?

Resurrection, it is a difficult word. A word that is barely tolerated by our ears. It's a clear word, a plain word. Too plain. It means what it says, something mighty, crystal-clear, complete. It signifies: that is our world, our life with its imprisonments and tragedies of sorrow and of sin, life with its doubts and unanswered questions, life with its grave mounds and crosses for the dead, is a puzzle so immense that all answers are silent before it. Nothing, absolutely nothing we do, we who live this fate, sin and death, with its layered festering need, there is nothing we can do to stop it; Everything seems too insignificant to stop it. We admit it, there is no way out.

But there is the possibility of a miracle happening – no, not a miracle but –the- miracle, the miracle of God – God's

incomprehensible, saving intervention and mercy, the all-inclusive renewal that leads from death to life that comes from God. God's creation word, God's life word, -- resurrection. Resurrection, not progress, not evolution, not enlightenment. Resurrection says,

“Rise up! You are dead, but I give you life.”

That is proclaimed here, and it is the way the world is saved. Take away resurrection or make something else of it, something smaller, something less than the absolute whole, less than the absolute ultimate, or less than the absolutely powerful, and you have taken away all, the unique, the last hope for us on earth.

Who is there that does not desire the promise of freedom, life, & hope for the future?

But what disturbs us, what is hard to endure and what we have a difficult time admitting is the awfulness of our chains, the imprisonment in which we suffer, from which there is no escape.

We let anyone tell us about the love of God; we rejoice when love is proclaimed to us. But we don't seem to see that all this is meaningless if we are not at the same time shocked as if touched by a bolt of lightning by the depth that the love of God has to stoop. We

don't like to see that we are deeply imprisoned. That we can't help ourselves; that we are a people who live in the shadow of death.

When we hear that crystal-clear word "resurrection" the word also heard is "death." It is understood that in the midst of life, even in a blooming and healthy life, there is a yawning chasm, a deep pit that can't be filled by any art or power of humanity. Only one word is sufficient to cover this chasm, to fill this pit, and that is the word, "resurrection."

This word "resurrection" is serious. Because it shows our lives so clearly; it proclaims freedom but lets us discover our prison chains. It tells us that the one and only and last refuge is God. It is hard to tolerate this assessment and so we seek to deny the resurrection, or at least we attempt to minimize it. We alter it. We change the truth of its unconditional, wonderful, divine essence. We alter it into something human.

And then on Easter day, we say something about the rejuvenation of nature, or the romantic appearing of the blossoms, or the revival of the flowers after yesterday's snow. We interpret the message that Jesus is victor, not in its literal sense, but we interpret it as a symbol or a human idea. In that case the message tells us that

the world is not so bad off. After each and all evils there naturally follows something good. We must not lose our courage. We take heart. We hope.

The remarkable thing about it is that the real truth of the resurrection might be too strong for us, because it will be hidden or concealed. It always breaks forth, through all these romantic dreams about reappearing blossoms and the comforts which we offer each other. Resurrection rises up and shouts at us, asking us:

“Do you really think that is all I have to say to you? Do you really believe that is why Jesus came to earth, why he agonized and suffered, why he was crucified and rose again on the third day, to become merely a symbol for the truth that eventually everything will be all right? Don't you understand what I am all about?”

But we won't admit it. And as long as we will not admit it, the word “resurrection” will be a difficult word, a rock of offense, hard and offensive, because it is so sincere and because we cannot honestly face it without having to admit that life is difficult, that the world is dark, that death is not child's play and that we are not done with our sins. No cultural education, no art, no evolutionary development helps us beyond our sins. We must receive assistance from the ground up.

When the steep walls of our security are broken to bits, and we are forced to become humble, poor, pleading, then we are driven more to surrender and give up all that we have, surrender and give up those things which we formerly used to protect and defend and hold to ourselves against the voice of resurrection. We edge over very close to the place where we can hear the great “but God” which immediately follows,

“But God who is rich in mercy, because of his great love he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses has made us alive together with Christ.”

“But God” – yes there resurrection is proclaimed. There a new door is opened when all other exits are barricaded. There a new page is turned, the old is past, turned over and laid back.

“But God, who is rich in mercy” – a tremendous, new, and unexpected possibility opens to us after all possibilities are exhausted; a great, radiant freedom bursts forth after we harbor no more hope that we might escape the imprisonment of our character and our circumstance, our troubles and our burdens.

“But God.” Do we understand that the resurrection is a goal for which there is no rationale, requires no human support, human knowledge, or human experience to make it true.

Do we have the ability to breathe and be happy about this “but God?” It’s a good question. Are we able to let our lives come to such a point, where without our assistance “even though you are dead in your sins ... but God who is rich in mercy...”

Yes, truer than our sin, truer than all our experiences and our thoughts, truer than all our doubts and afflictions, truer than death, graves, and hell. This freedom God gladly gives us, that even though we are sinners and mortal God makes us alive together with Christ.”

This is the Easter message. This is the Easter gospel. Why don’t we believe it? Why do we always strive against this mighty “but God who is rich in mercy?” Why don’t we really know that we have been made alive through the mercy of God? Doesn’t it pierce everything, suspend everything, and renew everything?

These questions are this questions: Why do we still think that we can live our life without God, even for one hour?

“But God who is rich in mercy...” God is done with our unbelief, God is done with it. For the resurrection is not simply one word, one

idea, a program. Resurrection is fact. Resurrection has happened.
The contradiction is broken. Our human lives have already become
the stage of the divine mercy. Jesus Christ has risen from the dead.
He has risen indeed.