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Texts: John 11: 17-24; Luke 23: 32-34; Luke 24: 1-12; Romans 12: 3-5

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Easter Sunday

The Many Resurrections of Easter

One of the great challenges of Easter Sunday is the array of beliefs and responses that are represented by all of you on a morning such as this. Some are true believers, and have no trouble at all swallowing this thing called resurrection. Others find this whole thing baffling and strange, akin to observing a tribe whose rituals and customs are foreign. Some are here for the music, preferring not to think about the story much at all. There are some others, I am guessing, who wish to believe the Easter story, who hope to be persuaded that it matters. And there are those for whom the story matters immensely, but not in a literal way. I will confess to you that I have inhabited each of those roles throughout my life. And I will say further that whether you believe the story all the way down or whether you attend church on Easter the way some people go to the zoo, I'm simply glad you're here. We're each of us carrying so many burdens and anxieties right now. We've been strained emotionally, and sometimes materially, by all we've been through these past several years. And so my hope this morning is that whatever I say might serve to alleviate some of those strains rather than adding to them, to lift, even momentarily, some of the burdens that we've been carrying, rather than piling on new ones.

What I'd like to propose this morning is that there are multiple ways of understanding the event called Easter. There's no single, right way, which means there might be ways that the story can speak to each of us in our individuality, wherever we might land religiously. And so my wish this morning is to present a kind of sampler of several possible variations on resurrection, the way a brewery or a vineyard might offer you a flight of their finest creations. Except here, I'll present to you four different bodies, each in search of resurrection, each of them with varied shades of meaning. I'll leave it to you to decide which of those meanings, which of those resurrections, seems most convincing. Rate them over Easter dinner. Turn them over in conversation over coffee and dessert a little later. What I hope is that there's at least one, and maybe more than one, that meets you in the place where you feel most lifeless, the place where you feel the most corpse-like, the place where you are most devoid of spirit.

Here's our first body. When Christianity became the dominant religion of the Mediterranean world, and then of Europe, and then of much of the world, it did so by suppressing the traditional religions it was supplanting. Those ancient, pre-Christian nature religions are a corpse that earlier generations of Christians buried. Holidays like Christmas and Easter were laid on top of pre-Christian nature religions, much the way that churches throughout Christendom were built on the sites of pre-Christian shrines. For that reason, the birth of Jesus is celebrated just after the winter solstice, when darkness covers the face of the earth. And Easter is celebrated at the moment that the earth itself is reemerging from the cold of winter. Just beneath our Easter celebrations, there's always been a trace of spring fertility rites, a vestige of those older nature religions. That's why flowers decorate the Meetinghouse. It's also why many Christians, including many among us, gather for a sunrise service on Easter morning. Yes, it's a way to mark the resurrection of Jesus, but it's also a return of the buried unconscious within our

ritual life. All those ancient ways of being, all those pre-Christian rituals and rites, wind up singing forth through us on Easter morning.

That's our first resurrection for the day. What if we needed those nature religions now more than ever? What if, having alienated ourselves from the natural world, we needed those traditional perspectives, found in indigenous wisdom, if we are to correct our relationship to the earth? To frame it as generously as possible, why not think of all that ancient wisdom as a kind of hidden deposit left there by the early church, a treasure that has been generously subsidizing our practices all along? And what if now, when the earth is buckling under the weight of our alienation from the sources of life - what if now was the time to enhance and celebrate those ancient, traditional, pre-Christian roots, finding ways to reorient ourselves to the elements - sun and water, air and sky? Perhaps that's what Easter needs to imply for many among us. Perhaps that's one of the resurrections we need to practice.

Let's move on to our second body. The one I have in mind this time is that of Lazarus, the brother to Mary and Martha, and the friend of Jesus. Lazarus falls ill, and Jesus doesn't arrive in time to heal him. And so Lazarus dies, remaining in the grave four days until Jesus finally shows up and raises him from the dead. The detail of this story that I want us to notice comes in the brief exchange that Martha has with Jesus when he does finally arrive. "Lord, I know my brother will be raised again on the last day," Martha says. She's acknowledging the possibility of an afterlife, but that's not at all what interests her. Her interest in resurrection has to do with getting her brother back here, now, in this life, not in the life to come. Movingly, she does get her brother back. In one of the most touching moments of the entire New Testament, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead.

But a little remarked upon feature of the story is that Lazarus will have to die again eventually. That means that Lazarus is living on borrowed time, gifted time. And that is the meaning of our second resurrection. To be resurrected in this sense is to understand that all time is a gift, and then to treat it as such. For all the cancer survivors out there, I think you know this best of all. When the cancer goes into remission, or when our bodies somehow recover from a near fatal illness, we live in Lazarus time. When we gather around the bedside of a grandparent or parent or friend, and are given even a day or two of clarity and connection, we live in Lazarus time, when we are simply thankful for the gift of life, for the pleasure of being with our friends and family for just a little longer. Sooner or later, it comes to an end, as all things do. Even for Lazarus. But in the meantime, there is the gift of now, and it must be treated as such - as a gift. That's a truth that applies to all of us. We've got just a little while to stay here, but as Martha well understood, that's time enough to love those around us, and to appreciate every day as another gift.

Let's linger with Lazarus just a little longer, because there's another implication of his resurrection that we need. When he emerges from the tomb, he not only gets more time - he gets another chance, to make amends, to right what had been wrong. We don't know what Lazarus may have needed to change within his life. He was a friend to Jesus, and he was beloved by his sisters, so it's likely that he was a great guy. But within every arc of existence, there are ways that we're called to grow. In that indeterminate zone between life and death in which Lazarus exists at the moment of Jesus's arrival, there is, then, a potentiality waiting to be actualized - the potential that he'll come back altered, changed for the better, more alive to his own deep story, more attuned to the needs of those around him.

Such potentialities exist for each of us too. Thankfully, we don't need to go through a near death experience to realize that. There are points of intensification within every human life

that can lead to such awakenings. Every threshold moment in our lives is a point of intensification: a birth or a baptism, a graduation or a marriage, a major illness, a new job, a lost job, a new relationship, a failed relationship, a holiday, a festival, a journey. Those are zones of intensification in human life in which this kind of resurrection comes into view: the conviction, as T.S. Eliot once put it, that “you must change your life.” That is, in essence, what every church service is about, what every liturgy points to, what every one of our partnership journeys is attempting to do: to create a temporary intensification of life, such that new potentialities - moral, aesthetic, social, religious - become awakened inside of us. Easter is itself meant to be a zone of intensification, and so I ask each of you: what is it that needs to change in your life? What might be awakened and actualized as a result of your time here today?

Our third body is the most familiar of all. It is that of Jesus himself. But it is actually a moment just prior to his death that speaks most fully about the kind of life that will continue to animate this body. In his final moments on the cross, Jesus utters words that I take to be the pinnacle of his teachings, the pinnacle of his very being. As he hangs there dying, his lips parched and cracked, Jesus looks upon his killers, and says, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.” It’s a sign that the resurrection has begun already, even there. It’s a sign that violence and retribution were being definitively interrupted with an entirely different moral economy, one based upon grace and forgiveness. Is that not precisely what Jesus had practiced all along? Is that not the unforgettable giving, the impossible forgiveness that he had been demonstrating throughout his ministry? The resurrection in this third sense, then, is a way of saying that not even the worst death imaginable can kill that impossible grace. It’s telling that once the disciples hear the rumor of Jesus’s resurrection, they’re told that Jesus will meet them in Galilee, the very place where the blind were given sight, where the lame were made to walk, and where those living in captivity had found freedom. In other words, the disciples are told that they would find Jesus again in the works of mercy that he had accomplished. Jesus would live again wherever that impossible giving and forgiving took place, especially among those that Jesus called “the least of these.”

That’s the third meaning of resurrection. Jesus lives whenever Jesus is enacted, demonstrated, and performed in the lives of those who continue to be haunted by his story. That kind of performance is precisely how Jesus brought God into the world. In Jesus reached into the most vulnerable, frail, and delicate parts of the human condition, where shame, or bodily illness, or social exclusion, or hunger gnawed at life. It was a demonstration, a performance, of God’s presence. Jesus extended a hand of mercy, reaching into the most abject places of human existence to assure people that they were not forsaken or alone, a demonstration of how God does that for each of us. Despite the trappings of our outward markings and appearances, it turns out that at some level, we’re all touched by those same delicate frailties. Jesus lives again when we enact Jesus, when we practice Jesus, when we reach our hands toward one another, extending that same mercy toward others, while also allowing our vulnerabilities to be touched, and maybe even graced. Jesus lives in precisely those sorts of practices.

There’s a final body that I must show you. It is not the body of an individual, but rather of a social body that no longer knows how to cohere. It is a body in which one part says to another part, I have no need of you. That’s the kind of dead body that the Apostle Paul was confronting when he wrote to the Roman church. In the New Testament, resurrected bodies are usually understood to be social bodies. The bodies in need of resurrection are those in which some parts begin to say to one another, “I have no need of you.” That’s exactly the kind of body that we’ve been experiencing so often today, as various members of our own society say to

others, “I have no need of you.” That condition is one of the most painful ways that we experience death. “We have no need of you,” is what some legislatures have been telling black voters of late. It’s what some states have been telling families with two dads, or two moms, or no dad or no mom. It’s what some have been communicating to kids who identify as trans, and it’s what we’ve been saying to a lot of immigrants for a long time now - we have no need of you. The rollbacks of environmental regulations have effectively said as much about the natural world. Believe it or not, some legislatures even have a finger in the wind right now, wondering if it might be possible to roll back laws regarding inter-racial marriage. Democracy itself is the corpse on the table, as some seek to establish once and for all a narrow and minoritarian view, where only a select few parts of the democratic body are welcome. It goes without saying that this is now a global condition, as the war in Ukraine demonstrates. Democracies around the world are in a precarious position. But some of the deepest fissures exist within the United States, where parts of the body have been emboldened to say - we have no need of you.

Not long ago, I read a story that captured something of what’s at stake.¹ Like many places across the country, the little town of Cambridge, Maryland has been riven by social divisions over the past several years, but really, for much longer than that. Cambridge is one of the places that Harriet Tubman once did her work, and a thriving African American community grew up there. In the late 60’s, members of the Klan burned down many of the prominent black businesses in the community, and the city has never fully recovered. That’s why it was surprising that, after the murder of George Floyd, the City Council agreed that the words Black Lives Matter should be painted on the road in front of the city hall. It was a way for some members of the body to indicate that they were listening, rather than saying, “we have no need of you.”

One night, someone defaced the painting with their truck, burning rubber through all the letters, so that ugly tire tracks appeared like gashes on the surface of the street. “We have no need of you,” the tracks may as well have said. The act was picked up on camera, and the perpetrator was identified - a 21 year old white man who couldn’t stand all the agitation by black people. The woman who did the painting was invited to repair it, but she told the City Council that she had another idea. She invited the young man to sit and have a conversation with her. He was shocked and embarrassed that he had been caught, but he agreed to talk. She told him what it was like to grow up black in Cambridge, and she invited him to tell her what it was like to be white in town. She told him what the phrase “Black Lives Matter” actually means to black folk. At one point, the young man said, “I am so sorry. What can I do?”

A few days later that young man stood with the artist and issued a public apology for what he had done. And then they both took up paint brushes. Instead of painting over the tire tracks, they painted beautiful flowers emerging from the top of each track. Those ugly marks of defacement were transformed into the stems of roses.

It’s a tiny moment, I know, and maybe it’s easy to dismiss it as so much sentimentality. More than a few black folks in town wondered if the City Council would have extended the same courtesy to young black men and women if they had gotten into trouble. Even so, I sense in that story a fourth kind of resurrection, one in which a few individuals learned to say with the Apostle Paul, that “we are members, one of another.” It will take a thousand, and maybe a million such moments, to resuscitate and resurrect our democratic body. But we must remember that such moments of reconciliation and resurrection are possible. We must remember before it’s too late

¹ A story found in Journal for Preachers. See “Tread Marks and Roses: Glimpses of Resurrection” by Thomas Long, Easter 2021.

that we still might achieve a deeper understanding, and a deeper union, as we all seek to dwell on the planet together.

Four bodies. Four possible resurrections, and likely a whole lot more besides. What I'm saying to you is that there's no one way to approach these stories. There's no one way to understand what we do on Easter morning. If we're lucky, the stories solicit us, call to us, setting our minds and our spirits in motion. What I hope is that in the great variety of responses, you sense that somewhere in it all, there is room for you, for your questions, for your convictions, and for your aspirations. My hope is that somewhere in it all, the lifeless places in you are revived, that the wounded places in you find healing, and that we all come just a little closer to being able to say that we are members, one of another, no matter what brought us here this morning, and no matter what we think now that it's about time to go.