



An ancient Easter ritual; we don't do it anymore. Just before the gospel at the Easter Vigil, the master of the choir used to walk solemnly up to the celebrant. And there, standing before the priest or bishop presiding at that great liturgy, he would say, "Most Reverend Father, I announce to you a great joy, 'The Alleluia is back'."¹ Then the choir would sing with great power the first alleluias of Easter. Liturgically, spiritually, it was like taking a deep breath, singing those first angelic alleluias. Whatever remained of Lent, the alleluias chased them away. Easter, a revelation of joy, of light, beauty, of the happiness of children and lovers; today is a beautiful day, and we should give thanks for it.

But what accounts for this Easter joy? Is it real? Is it staged, scripted? Or is it grace? Aristotle talked a lot about drama, tragedies played out on the stage. He was fascinated by the fact that watching scripted tragedies gave us so much pleasure. Tragedy, he said, aroused "pity," and this was pleasurable because seeing others suffer and struggle, without suffering ourselves, was a sort of learning experience. The pleasure of tragedy, he thought, was emotional fodder for those who weren't philosophers, a way for the un-intellectual to engage the deeper things of reality and philosophy.² And it was a good thing for what it was, he thought, on its own terms.

But for us it causes a question, and it's worth asking: Is that what we're doing today? Are we all merely sharing in some great cultural drama, a mere catharsis two-thousand-years-old? Or is it something else? It's not impious to wonder about the meaning of all this, to ask yourself, "What is the point of the resurrection?" "What does it mean?" "What does it mean for me?"

John, the beloved disciple: he got it right away. Simply looking at the empty tomb, it says, "he saw and believed."³ Peter wasn't so quick. Luke says when Peter saw the empty tomb, he went home "amazed"—the Greek gives the sense he was more confused than anything else.⁴ And, of course, our poor dear Magdalene sat weeping outside the tomb, in the darkness—heart cold, her eyes clouded with tears. She would not be relieved—not even angels could help her—until the moment she heard his voice—when she heard him say to her, "Mary!"⁵ Each disciple reacted differently—one inspired, the other confused, one impassioned, another skeptical. Not much different from today really, some finding it easy to believe, others less so. Yet, regardless of the diversity of the disciples' reaction, each one of them had to contend with the same basic facts: the tomb is empty, Jesus is risen, and some even say they've seen him.

Now if this is true, then other things Jesus said might very well be true too. Things like, "because I live...you will live."⁶ And other things like, "take courage, I have conquered the world."⁷ And, "I give you a kingdom, just like the one my Father gave me."⁸ And it's also likely what Paul said is true too: "you...will appear with him in glory," he said to those who believe in the risen Jesus.⁹ Eternal life, communion in the very nature of God, sanctifying grace—we hardly know what it means any more, we've heard these words so many times. But for those who believe, for those here not out

¹ Louis Bouyer, *The Paschal Mystery*, 317

² Aristotle, *Rhetoric* II.8

³ John 20:8

⁴ Luke 24:12

⁵ John 20:16

⁶ John 14:19

⁷ John 16:33

⁸ Luke 22:29 *paraphrase*

⁹ Colossians 3:4

of cultural reflex or because they want to make someone else happy, for those with real hearts that really beat and seek the love that is not shallow but is holy and true, they see it or at least they can see it if they open their hearts just a little bit more. Some can't see it, but that doesn't mean it's not there, that it's not true. It just means you can't see it. If blind man told me the sun didn't exist, I wouldn't believe him; rather, I'd remind him he's blind. There is a divine life open to each of us, free and fearless, life opened up beyond the barriers of death, beyond the barriers of violence and division, tribal hatreds and pathetic political posturing. "I have seen the Lord!" Mary Magdalene said to the disciples.¹⁰ These words don't just describe her vision of Jesus in the garden, they describe an entirely new form of existence, an entirely new life, an entirely new ethics.

What I'm trying to say is that the resurrection is not some sort of psychological game, some sort of emotional trick to make simple people feel better about themselves, nor is it a myth about some path to the afterlife meant to assuage the pain of our present world. Rather the resurrection is new life *now*, a new radical form of existence given to believers now by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus, we believe, is risen from the dead, and his eternal life is given to us now if we believe in him and live our lives according to his grace and will. And this, if you'll allow it, changes everything.

The great Orthodox theologian, David Bentley Hart, said once, "Easter should make rebels of us all."¹¹ Now what does he mean? I remember once meeting a member of the United States Congress—a powerful member of Congress, and a good and decent man. I met with him for an hour and a half. It was a tense meeting, contentious and sometimes heated. And like I said, he was a good man, but a fearful man—trapped by one fear right after another. And he tried to assure me of the legitimacy of fear, of the necessity of fear and of the power necessary to manage it all. I was impressed how such a powerful man could be so fearful, so trapped.

Now I'm not talking politics here, I'm just telling you that in that moment I was impressed how true and radical the resurrection is, how different it is than fear. I learned something about what the resurrection means, listening to all the fearful things he told me I should be worried about. I learned about what the resurrection should mean for Christians today, for those willing to accept that the gospel should actually make a difference. That is, I learned that because Jesus is risen, we shouldn't fear what people tell us we ought to fear, whether their members of Congress or your next door neighbor. Jesus rose from the dead and now sits at the right hand of the Father. By faith, we are in Christ, and though we die in the flesh, we will rise for ever in him. Now what this means is that we can love like Jesus even though the world calls it dangerous or idealistic. We can forgive like Jesus even though the world tells us we should never trust certain sorts of people. We can refuse the violence the world says is necessary or inevitable. We can live the life Jesus said we should live—peaceful, loving, open—because we no longer fear death because death is not the end. What does the resurrection mean? It means we now have reason to love despite all the reasons the world gives us to hate. We now have reason to hope despite all the reasons the world gives us to be afraid. "Easter should make rebels of us all." "I have seen the Lord!" These people, these Christians, aren't the slight and wispy dreamers of some imaginary world. They are the martyrs—those who no longer fear anyone or anything and who love like Jesus even if it brings them shame and death—because shame is glory and death is nothing. What else do you think all this means? Why on earth are you here?

So what is Easter to you? What does the resurrection mean for you? Are you shaped by the love of Jesus or by the fear of the world? Is Easter simply an emotional or cultural festivity, or is it

¹⁰ John 20:18

¹¹ David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 81

the beginning of a revolution—of love, of peace? What do you believe? Don't give me some Sunday School answer. Show me your life. Do you live like Jesus is risen from the dead? Do you live like he's the Lord? This is the spiritual work of the resurrection which each one of us must take up. Do we live like Easter people in this Good Friday world? Or are we still shaped by futile fears of death? Whatever your answer, beg for the risen grace of Jesus. Beg for the grace not only to say you believe in the risen Lord but also for the grace to live like you believe it.

There is a joy and a power here waiting for you if you'll only ask for it. A million Christians have laughed at the pretentious power of the world and have loved and have died for the goodness of God—for love of the poor and outcast. They laugh because they possess a power the world has never known. And you can have it if you want it. If you'll let go and believe and give—give yourself to him, to the one we celebrate today. Christ is risen, risen indeed. What on earth do you think that means?

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