

The First Resurrection

Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)

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John 11:1-44

“This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. Over these the second death has no power....”

Though two weeks have passed, I continue to be undone by the memory of miners spinning up out of the pit and into the blinding light of day and life and love. The fact of the rescue, in and of itself, was astounding enough. But as one who sees the events of this mortal life through what Augustine called “the admirable depths of Scripture”, I was even more undone by the figuration of the communion of saints and the resurrection of the body I saw unfolding on the meager screen of my television.

“That pit could have been their grave,” said one reporter and I thought of the psalm of David that we intoned a few moments ago: “For you will not abandon me to the grave, nor let your holy one see the Pit.” “I met God. I met the devil. God won,” said a miner in the light of day, and I thought of the gospel we proclaim at the last on Christmas Eve: “The light has come into the world and the darkness has not overcome it.” But more remarkable was the sight of each miner emerging from the Phoenix to a crowd of cheering loved ones. “Each time a miner rises,” said the reporter, “he is welcomed as though he were the first” and I thought of the saints greeting each one we have loved and lost to death as though she were the first, he were the first. I thought of the multitudes I have buried in graves all over this city and in the columbarium behind me, now hid in Christ, who will one day greet is on that distant shore as, from our tombs, we rise to enter the room in God that God has prepared for us all.

I say again, the rescue, in and of itself, was astonishing enough. But for those who see the events of the day through the “admirable depths” of Scripture, we see more. Make no mistake: I do not mean to say, as many of our Calvinist forbears might say, that I saw God’s hand in the rescue of thirty-three miners in Chile while, this week, thirty-seven miners in China were allowed by the same God to perish. Truthfully, the admirable depths of Scripture lend even more meaning to those whose rescue from the pit in China is no less true because we can only imagine their welcome into eternal life.

But imagine we must on earth because we are a species that lives and dies by stories. That is to say, we are forever deciding which story to tell ourselves in the darkness, in the pit, when our end—literally or metaphorically, momentarily or finally—is before us.

No doubt, given the little deaths we die day by day, we tell ourselves the story that, in the pitch blackness of the tomb of fear and regret, would have us believe our lives begin and end with the breath that is in us; tell ourselves that what meaning there is to be had in defeat turns out to be a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing; tell ourselves that, in the darkness, we are utterly alone.

“I entered Auschwitz as a non-believer,” wrote Primo Levi, “and as a non-believer I was liberated and live to this day. Actually the experience...with its frightful iniquity confirmed me in my nonbelief. It has prevented me and still prevents me from conceiving of any form of providence or transcendent justice.” Levi goes on to

confess that for one weak moment, in October 1944, when he “lucidly perceived the immanence of death...naked and compressed among [his] naked companions” with his personal index card in hand, waiting to file past the ‘commission’ that would decide with one glance whether he would go to the gas chambers or be strong enough to work, he almost prayed. “For one instance,” he writes, “I felt the need to ask for help, for asylum; then despite my anguish, equanimity prevailed....A prayer under these conditions,” he concluded, “would have been not only absurd (what rights could I claim? and from whom?), but blasphemous, obscene, laden with the greatest impiety of which a nonbeliever is capable.”

So goes the story that tells us we are alone and on our own; that we are our best selves when we face death and darkness as reasonable, autonomous, enlightened creatures; that tells us we are mortals who will go to our graves uncompromised intellectually by some momentary fear of death, brave soldiers before the prospect of our return to nothingness, moral agents who will be remembered for a brief moment in human history and then forgotten. If the Pew Foundation is correct, this is the story most people are telling themselves these days: a factual story, you could say, as far as facts are able take us.

But the story that has gotten each of us out of bed this morning is a story, contrary to the facts, that tells the truth at the boundary of mortal life and eternal life: tells us, as we go to the grave, that we are confronted not only with death but with God. “If death has such terrors for us,” observes Karl Barth, “it is because in death we shall finally fall into the hands of the living God. But we shall fall into [*God’s*] hands and not the hands of another....We shall not be alone in death,” Barth confesses. “And this is not in any sense an unimportant factor.” In the darkness, said Mario Sepulveda Espinace, “I met God. I met the devil. God won.” Said another, “There were thirty-four of us down there: God never left us.” At the boundary between mortal life and eternal life, these men were confronted with the living God, the God revealed in the One who descended into hell and rose again on the third day.

So we confess, Sunday in and Sunday out, “he descended into hell” without a thought until, alone in the pit, we feel the need to ask for help, for asylum (what rights can we claim? and from whom?). *As we live*, the descent into hell means that there is no hell we will inhabit without him: no place between birth and death, however dark and hopeless it may seem, where God in Christ is not. He has gone before us in all things.

But *as we die* and as the rescuers risked death by their descent into the pit to save the lives of the miners, the image of Christ’s descent into hell returned me to the fresco of the same in the first cell on the lay brothers’ corridor of the Cloisters of San Marco. On a hot August day in Florence, I searched the eyes of a thousand times ten thousand haloed souls in limbo who “disbelieved for joy” as they beheld their rescuer, his foot on the flattened door of hell, his hand outstretched to grasp the last who now is first (Adam!), with the devil and so death writhing in defeat underneath the weight of God’s mercy.

The fresco depicts what is known as the “harrowing of hell”, a doctrine whose truth surely took hold of thirty-three men in the pitch black of a collapsed mine, even as its promise sustained those who prayed for their rescue a half mile up. The doctrine has its warrant in Scripture, but it was the Gospel of Nicodemus that gave the church an imagination for our rescue:

And the Lord stretching forth his hand said, “Come unto me, all ye my saints which bear my image and my likeness. Ye that by the tree and the devil and death were condemned, behold now the devil and death are condemned by the

tree.” And forthwith all the saints were gathered in one under the hand of the Lord. And the Lord, holding the right hand of Adam, said unto him, “Peace be unto thee with all thy children, who are my righteous ones.” But Adam, casting himself at the knees of the Lord entreated him with tears and beseeching and said in a loud voice, “I will magnify thee Lord, for thou hast set me up and not made my foes to triumph over me: O Lord my God I cried unto thee and thou hast healed me; Lord thou hast brought my soul out of hell, thou hast delivered me from them that go down to the pit.”

Now the pitch black of the cave in Fra Angelico’s fresco is flooded with the light of the glory that is Christ’s presence, I write on that day in August, light and heat streaming in, as well, from the little window in the cell. Hell holding all who had died from the beginning of time, it is a mass grave, a cave as deep as it is dark. I found myself wondering if the first, who are last, will ever make it up out of the darkness and into the light. So too, I held my breath as each miner made the ascent, hoping against hope that all would be saved. What I glimpsed, through the admirable depths of Scripture, was the One who gave himself over to death that death would have no dominion, harrowing hell to rescue the dead from what would have been their grave—with none left out! His grace is irresistible.

Though finally we cannot help but ask what God’s victory over death will mean as these men, like Lazarus, are given another go at mortal life. Already there is talk of post traumatic stress syndrome; still they will know disease, divorce, grief, will undergo pain and sorrow and tears until the day they lie to die for good. Yet if Christ is the Victor over death, his victory means at least one thing, a thing of no little consequence, says Barth. It means that we, with them, can no longer look at our death as though it were in front of us. It is behind us. Oh, we will go to the grave, each one of us; but because we share in the first resurrection, wrote the elder John to a church about to be martyred in numbers, we will be spared what he called the second death: the death of eternal separation from God.

I think the story of Lazarus holds this truth in solution. “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep,” said Jesus to the disciples. The earliest Christians used the term for those who had died and who, because the real battle with death had been fought and won by God in Christ, are spared the “second death” that is eternal separation from God. Looking back on those who had died, these Christians “really looked back on Jesus Christ who, as ‘the first fruits of them that slept’, robbed death of its sting and brought life and immortality to light even when they were *in extremis*, so that death could not be anything but a falling asleep.” [Barth]

With the story of Lazarus set on the cusp of Jesus’ crucifixion, Martha knows only that Jesus has not come in time to save her brother from death. “Your brother will rise again,” says Jesus in the face of the first death. “I know,” she answers, “that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” “I am the resurrection,” says Jesus, here, now, “and the life. He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” We, of course, do not. We believe and live by the facts rather than the truth this story tells us. We live as though death has dominion. That is the story we tell ourselves!

But for those who have looked death in the face, for the miners and Lazarus and those who have tasted death and returned to live another day, there can be no doubt that he has died our death so that the first death, the death that will eventually land us all in the tomb, the death brandished by those who presume to hold the power of life and death over the least of these, that death will hold no power over the life they and we have still to live.

My friends, as together we consider the foundation of this house, may I nominate the narrative that is Scripture as a part of the foundation, nominate the story that tells us the truth on the boundary of mortal life and eternal life; the story whose words point to the savior who descended once for all into the pit that could have been your tomb, his hand outstretched, to save you from life without him. His is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. Over these the second death has no power. Thanks be to God!

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