

## The Power to Redeem

Isaiah 44:21-23

John 20:1-18

“O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.” Psalm 130:7-8

For a season, we have gathered on Sunday morning to cry to the Lord from out of the depths of the helplessness and hopelessness of the human condition. We who must die demand a miracle! Now on this glorious Easter morning, amid shouts of “He is risen!” “He is risen indeed!” the church proclaims that the Lord to whom we have been crying since we climbed out of our mother’s womb, the Lord to whom we may cry all the days of our life until we are laid in a tomb, is the God who raised Jesus from the dead. With this God, says the psalmist, there is steadfast love and with him is great power to redeem.

I speak in particular, this morning, to those for whom the resurrection of the dead is not simply a speculative question, a question to be addressed apologetically in hopes that a reasonable faith might be constructed. Rather this is a word proclaimed to any for whom the resurrection is a matter of life and death because one who once was held close and dear in life is gone too soon. This is a word proclaimed to any who have loved fiercely and, in the face of death, been forced with the hands to let go, though never with the heart. This is a word proclaimed to any who have stood at the edge of an open grave not only in grief, but also in regret for a word left unspoken or a life cut short or an existence compromised by the ravages of disease. And it is a word proclaimed to a world in which death appears to have dominion over whole nations and cities and peoples, over entire neighborhoods denied life’s fullness just down the avenue. The word to be wrung out of Scripture for all of its truth, in life and in death, is simply and profoundly this: “With the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.”

What does that word mean for the living, but more; what does that word mean for all those *who rejoice with us but upon another shore and in a greater light*, as the Christmas liturgy goes, *whose hope was in the Word made flesh, and with whom in the Lord Jesus we are one for evermore*? Our question, says Jurgen Moltmann, “is not whether our existence might possibly be immortal, and if so which part of it; the question is: will love endure, the love out of which we receive ourselves, and which makes us living when we [even haltingly, give ourselves away for love’s sake]....It is the conflict between love and death which confronts us with the only real problem of life.” The battle, of course, is finally not ours to win but God’s. “Our human loves are indeed felt to demand continuance,” wrote Scottish preacher and theologian John Baillie. “But how can we believe such continuance to be secured? I do not see that there is any answer, unless love be more than human, unless it be divine, unless *God* be love.”

I take these words of theologians to mean that the resurrection of the dead is neither about the resuscitation of dead bodies nor about the continuation of our consciousness, but about the way of God’s love with us eternally. To borrow Paul’s words, whether we live or whether we die, we belong to God. Christ’s resurrection reveals the reality of an everlasting relationship of mercy and grace, of healing and transformation, over which death finally has no power, because the God who raised Jesus from the dead will let nothing—neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor powers nor things present nor things to come nor height nor depth nor any other creature separate us from God’s love made known to us in Jesus Christ.

Tragically, when the conflict between love and death confronts us in the living of these days, we choose death. We choose the deathly separations that literally break hearts and sever the bonds between husband and wife, lover and beloved, parent and child, friend and friend; we insist on the deathly separations that grieve the heart of God between privileged and poor, black and white, gay and straight, nation and nation. And we continue to choose the distance, to refuse the conversation with God, a choice that finally finds us in extremis crying from out of the depths for the God who harrows hell to be with us.

We may, of course, try to muster the power within us, sure that with a little more effort we will be able on our own to overcome the power of death to divide us. We may even try to repair what we have broken or heal the wounds we have inflicted, telling ourselves the lie that we have all the time in the world to make things right. But without God at the end of the day, the door will be shut in our face, the future foreclosed, the casket lowered into the ground, leaving us to say over the grave, “Well, my dear, that is the end of you!” Leaving us with our regrets and a memory destined to die with us too unless the Easter claim be true: with God there is great power to redeem!

But of that power to redeem, I need to say both more and less than Protestants are used to saying on Easter morning. Death, we shout, is swallowed up in victory! That, says Paul, is the *final* truth when the end comes, and Christ delivers the kingdom to God after destroying every rule and every authority and every power, the last power destroyed being death itself. Until that day, says Paul, the operative redemptive word is change; is not the annihilation of death but our transformation in death. We shall not all sleep, said Brian to us in the promise of the gospel, but we shall all be changed.

By that Paul meant that God is not done with this frail, impaired, mortal life of ours at death, but hides our life in Christ. "So much of our life remains unfinished. We have started something, but have never completed it. We have tried to map out a plan for our lives, but the plan was spoiled. We have failed. The pain has left wounds which have healed only on the surface. How can life here ever be finished and complete?" It cannot, says Paul. Therefore in Christ and with him on the way to God's final defeat of death, the person we have been--the broken pieces, the secret sins, the forgotten purposes--will be changed. From God's perspective, from the eternity that sees us whole, this will happen in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye; from our perspective, it is a mystery. *But we will be changed until we are wholly ourselves.*

"Everything," says Moltmann, "that has put its mark on this life remains eternally. Otherwise we should be unable to recognize ourselves in eternal life, and could never arrive at ourselves....[Just as the] risen Christ could be recognized by the marks of the nails belonging to his death on the cross...[just as Mary Magdalene finally recognized his voice calling her name]...[so] we too will still be recognizable from the configuration of our truly lived life."

What then follows is not the torment and fear of purgatory, but a life hid in Christ—in the relationship of love which has no end—wherein we may "come back to [our] lives, and in the light of God's grace, in the power of God's mercy, put right what has gone awry, finish what was begun, pick up what was neglected, forgive...[and be forgiven], heal the hurts and be permitted to gather up the moments of happiness and to transform mourning into joy." Or in the words of Augustine, "On the seventh day, we will be ourselves." "I think, according to what the gospel suggests," writes a later theologian, "that I will have to re-suffer much and to re-live much, will have to bemoan much that was neglected, but that I shall not perish of it all, because God's goodness will hold me fast. I think that I shall have to suffer a transformation into the one I was really destined to be...."

Now that is a hopeful word to be pronounced at time of death over the lives of the privileged and protected. But it is a downright redemptive word to proclaim to those who were given life, but who were not permitted to live fully: the stillborn child or the baby who died only weeks after he was born; the little girl run over by a car when she was four; the disabled sister who never regained consciousness; the many torn to pieces by bombs or those falling from the sky in planes; the father whose cancer kept him from walking a daughter down the aisle; the colleague whose dark night of the soul ended in suicide; the wife and mother whose mind left this world long before her body gave out; the multitudes who have died of starvation or drought in Africa; the women and children raped and murdered as spoils of war; the youth killed in the senseless violence of a fearfully armed nation. God had, for these lives, a destiny as unique and unrepeatable as your own, a destiny spoiled in this life by the relentless dominion of death. Yet if there is with God great power to redeem, if Christ is the Lord of the living and of the dead, then the resurrection is God's earnest that these too are hid in Christ, and given a wider space, a more gracious time in which to become whole on the way to the God whose roominess has prepared a place for them.

The fresco of Fra Angelico that adorns your bulletin is the fresco that drew me to spend my sabbatical eight years ago in the Dominican Cloisters of San Marco in Florence. I imagine Fra Angelico has painted the moment just after the one in which Mary Magdalene exclaims, "Rabbouni." My eye goes to the empty space between two hands, whose movement is both toward and away. The distance and the nearness is the center of this fresco. Like Jesus' feet—one turned to go and the other planted in the garden grass next to Mary—his hands reveal the paradox of reaching out and holding apart. Mary is all movement toward him and yet obediently stops short of acting on her longing.

For us who remain in life, separated from those who are hid in Christ, this fresco holds in solution what Moltmann called the community of the living and the dead who are one in him. The most powerful, present embodiment I know of this community is acted out during the worship of base communities in Latin America. There, says Moltmann, "when the roll is called of the dead, of the people who have disappeared, and the martyrs, the whole congregation shouts out: 'Presente!'" In the community that bears witness to the redeeming power of the God who raised Jesus from the dead, the living and the dead are united by a common hope in death's destruction. Is this not precisely the witness borne by the Community to End Gun Violence as they rang a bell Friday afternoon for the 340 children of God killed this past year in the city even as the bell tolls presently in Tulsa?

Our shouts, in the main, may sound more personal than political today in this sanctuary. Still, we shout with base communities in Latin America and congregations in the Middle East and churches in this city, united by a common hope in the redeeming power of the God who raised Jesus from the dead, calling with confidence the names of those now hid in his living presence: Bill. Presente! Betty. Presente! Jayne. Presente! Elise. Presente! Elsie. Presente! Nelson. Presente! Jackie. Presente! Martha. Presente! Pauline. Presente! Jack. Presente! Polly. Presente! Debbie. Presente! Ed. Presente! Bob. Presente! It would take a lifetime to call all the names of the dead written on our collective hearts, save that on this Easter morning we know we need shout but one name in whom all those we have loved and lost are hid. That one is Jesus Christ. He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.