

Practice Resurrection  
John 10:14-24  
I John 3:16-24

“How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?”

Four weeks after Easter and I cannot stop thinking about what human existence might look like if we ever really lived as though death had no dominion, lived as though Christ’s resurrection had changed everything, because it has—except, as far as anyone can tell by looking around, it has not. Death still has hold of us, dictates our every waking moment, insinuates itself into our politics and our pocketbooks, sits down at our kitchen tables and seduces us every night before we drug ourselves to sleep. Moreover, death appears to be calling the shots as we walk shepherd-less through the valley of the shadow because why else would we be so obsessed with defending ourselves, securing our future, feathering our nest, providing for our own and keeping everything unpleasant offstage? Death decrees, in the words of Wendell Berry,

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,  
vacation with pay. Want more  
of everything ready-made. Be afraid  
to know your neighbors and to die.  
And you will have a window in your head.  
Not even your future will be a mystery  
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card  
and shut away in a little drawer.  
When they want you to buy something  
they will call you. When they want you  
to die for profit they will let you know.

For all intents and purposes, Easter has changed nothing about life on planet Earth because we who call ourselves Christians believe, and we are teaching our children to believe, that Easter has nothing to do with such flesh and blood things as economic justice and power politics, tax codes and defense budgets, minimum wages and Medicaid benefits, entitlement and exploitation. Religion post-resurrection, we say, should continue to stick to the spiritual, feel

good, “have a nice day” sentiment that will send us all home after an hour--“max”--on Sunday morning with nothing much more than a familiar hymn to occupy our undisturbed minds.

Scholars think this same spiritualizing of the resurrection prompted an elder in the early church to write the letter before us today. Apparently a preacher (probably a visiting preacher who began his ten minute sermon with a joke) had come through town and convinced believers that Jesus was not really human. The logic went something like this according to New Testament professor David Bartlett: “If [Christ] only appeared to be human, then he only appeared to suffer. If he only appeared to suffer, then he only appeared to love.” And here is the heart of the matter: if he only appeared to lay down his life—only appeared to love, then there is no earthly reason to think that following him would involve laying down our lives either, or sacrificing our well-being, or giving ourselves and our substance to a brother or sister in need. It was an earlier way of saying: don’t mess with the social order; stick to things spiritual.

Of course those first witnesses to the resurrection could not help but mess with a social order so completely in the thrall of death. “Why are we putting ourselves in danger every hour?” asked Paul to counter the same spiritualizing of the resurrection in Corinth. “I die every day!” he almost seems to shout and then goes on to explain to a community still living as though death had dominion, “If with merely human hopes I fought with wild animals at Ephesus, what would I have gained by it? If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die,’” Let us “Love the quick profit, the annual raise,/vacation without pay. Want more/of everything ready-made. Be afraid/to know our neighbors and to die” if the dead are not raised.

But in fact, I say again, Christ has been raised from the dead, Believing, really believing death to have no dominion over them, the disciples fearlessly began to engage in what the Czech theologian Jan Lochman has called “the historical practice of the resurrection.”

It is a practice that returns us, in the first place, to Friday and the human act of laying down our life, relinquishing the illusion of our privileged hold on the future that has been so seamlessly underwritten in this society by the power of death. “To retreat from the abyss and focus solely on the transcendent,” writes Scottish composer James Macmillan of the artist in this regard, “would be to conform with the post-Christian spiritual narcissism of our predominant...culture.” The clue that you are still in the grip of death, by the way, is if the thought of relinquishing your illusory control of the future terrifies you. Who can stand? According to Lochman, far from being terrified, “the disciples interpreted their experience as an invitation to freedom--freedom of a kind otherwise unknown in a period so fraught with oppressive powers and belief in fate....Hard on the heels of this invitation came the practical response,” Lochman continues, “the incomparable missionary venture of the infant church. Knowing what they knew, the apostles could not simply leave the world to stew in its own juice. In the light of the resurrection, they knew the world and its history were now open.” From the perspective of the cross, death had no dominion!

What would it look like if we lived in response to the invitation to freedom that the resurrection is; if we refused to let the world stew in its own juice; if we really believed that the world and its history were now open to God’s reign because death had no dominion? I know that in times such as these every specific suggestion I might make about what that would look like will be interpreted through the deathly lens of party politics, Hence I hie once more to the words of Wendell Berry:

So friends every day do something  
that won’t compute. Love the Lord.  
Love the world. Work for nothing.  
Take all that you have and be poor.  
Love someone who does not deserve it.  
Denounce the government and embrace

the flag. Hope to live in that free  
republic for which it stands.  
Give your approval to all you cannot  
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man  
has not encountered he has not destroyed....  
Practice resurrection!

In the second place, the practice of resurrection returns us to Holy Saturday and to the harrowing of hell under the earth, an early Christian belief that gives us an imagination for the anticipatory harrowing of hell on the earth, here and now. In the first cell on the lay brothers' corridor of the Cloisters of San Marco in Florence, I search 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 first part of the liturgy on Holy Saturday is in the dark, reports Robert Jenson, broken by the light of a candle burning with new fire. The great prayer begins, "This is the night in which, in ancient times, you delivered our forbears, the children of Israel, from the land of Egypt; and led them, dry-shod, through the Red Sea. This is the night in which the darkness of sin has been purged away by the rising brightness....This is the night in which, breaking the chains of death, Christ rises from Hades in triumph. For it would have profited us nothing to be born had we not also been redeemed....O necessary sin of Adam! That is wiped away in the death of Christ. O happy sin! That was worthy to have so great a Redeemer!" All this before the lights are turned up and the symbols of Good Friday removed.

If you are still with me imagine your life that was on Friday laid down dwelling in the company of brothers and sisters whose lives are a living hell on earth. Think of the once hoarded and now relinquished life by which you thought you were cheating death. See in your mind's eye a hand—perhaps your own—reaching down to pull out of the hell of hunger and homelessness,

out of the hell of war and violence, out of the hell of debt and debilitating illness, out of the hell of hopelessness and desperation a brother or sister in need, their eyes disbelieving for joy that God has not forgotten them but sent you, even you, to represent him who descended into hell.

“I deny the resurrection of Christ,” writes a young minister, “every day I do not serve at the feet of the oppressed, every day that I turn my back on the poor; I deny the resurrection of Christ when I close my ears to the cries of the downtrodden and lend my support to an unjust and corrupt system.” “We talk a lot these days about ‘practicing resurrection’” says Shane Claiborne of his community called The Simple Way in Kensington, “by making ugly things beautiful...and turning vacant lots into gardens...and loving people back to life. Not a bad encore after Easter here. After all, resurrection is something we get to do every day. Every day is Easter. We are resurrection people.” The community’s newest experiment is a greenhouse built on the fire-scorched land where their houses burned down five years ago. It includes a 200 gallon hydroponic fish pond—I bet like the ponds Billy Mebane has helped build in Haiti. “We are now cultivating life in these post-industrial ruins,” says Claiborne, “where we see the dark side of the global economy every day. Each morning we wake up on the wrong side of capitalism. But we see hope....We see grace piercing concrete. We see a neighborhood coming back to life, rising from the dead.” Practice resurrection.

But finally Sunday does dawn, when the practice of resurrection on the third day is hoping against hope, putting your whole trust not in the things which are seen, but in the things which are not seen, living with a light touch, an abiding gratitude, an astonished wonder that the love that death could not imprison now lives and abides in you. “When death is the final thing,” wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his unfinished *Ethics*, “earthly life is everything or nothing....When it is recognized, however, that the power of death has been shattered, when the

light of the miracle of the resurrection and the new life shines into the depths of the world of death, we do not demand of life any eternities, but take from life what life has to offer, which is not everything or nothing, but good and evil, important things and trivial things, joy and sorrow....”

Four weeks after Easter and I cannot stop thinking about what human existence might look like if we ever really lived as though death had no dominion, lived as though Christ’s resurrection had changed everything, because it has. Want not, therefore. Lie down in green pastures. Linger beside the still waters. Fear no evil. “Go with your love to the fields,” writes Wendell Berry at the last in echoes of the psalm.

Lie down in the shade. Rest your head  
in her lap. Swear allegiance  
to what is nighest your thoughts.  
As soon as the generals and the politicians  
can predict the motions of your mind,  
lose it. Leave it as a sign  
to mark the false trail, the way  
you didn’t go. Be like the fox  
who makes more tracks than necessary,  
some in the wrong direction.  
Practice resurrection.

The good shepherd has your back—eternally! Amen!