

## New Beginnings

It certainly seemed as if the prophet from Galilee had come to a bad end. Mighty in word and deed before God and all the people, some had hoped he would be the one to redeem Israel. The people had rejoiced when he entered Jerusalem riding a donkey during the days of preparation for Passover, seemingly fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah concerning the Messiah. But in just a few days, he had been seized by the Temple guard, abandoned by his followers, convicted of blasphemy by the Sanhedrin and insurrection by the Romans. They had killed him for that in the usual way, nailed him up for all to see as a failed revolutionary, as a warning to others who might try to disturb the Pax Romana and defy the might of Rome. But then had come the wild rumors, the unbelievable news repeated at first by just a few and then by more and more – God had raised Jesus from the dead! On the third day, the tomb had been found open and empty. Jesus himself had made mysterious appearances to many people in many places. Beyond all hope, beyond all rationality, he was alive!

We have gathered here this morning because we, too, believe the good news that God raised Jesus from death on that morning of the first day of the week so long ago. We are gathered here because we believe that Jesus lived then and lives now, enthroned at the right hand of God the Father as God's Only Son, the perfect self-revelation of God in human form, fully God and fully human. But ultimately, those simple statements of faith don't get us very far, despite their amazing claims, unless we can also talk about the difference they make. First, we must understand how the Easter event changed the story of Jesus – not just its ending but how it alters the significance of everything he said and did. Then we can begin to trace the impact of renewed life for Jesus as it brought new life, a new beginning for his disciples and continues to bring new life to us as believers and to the whole cosmos. If we simply celebrate the resurrection of Jesus this morning, then we have missed the point. Our true celebration lies in the realized idea that Jesus' new life means a fresh start for us and for all of God's creation.

So let's begin this morning with a consideration of what the resurrection means in the life of Jesus. Obviously, it gives a different ending to that story. Without the resurrection, we have the story of a wise rabbi with unusual powers. His healing abilities were well-known and his scriptural insights were respected even by the Pharisees with whom he so often clashed. After all, not only do we have stories of them agreeing with him but Nicodemus came to learn from him, unnamed Pharisees invited him to dinner and they took him seriously enough to bother to argue with him. They even warned him when they saw that he was in danger. Had the story of Jesus ended with the cross, then we might have had a few of his sayings preserved in the Talmud along with those of other rabbis from around that time. Perhaps some stories of his miracles would have been preserved, perhaps not. But it is unlikely that there would have been any Gospels and there certainly would have been no Pauline epistles. Paul would have gone to his grave as Saul of Tarsus, a good Pharisee, perhaps remembered as a bright student of Gamaliel with a few Talmudic entries of his own. But Rabbi Yeshua would not have been remembered as the Christ of God, the Messiah of Israel. In fact, because he led no armed insurrection, he would likely have become even more obscure than Judas of Galilee or Simon Bar Kochba whose revolutions in AD 6 and 130, respectively, were bloody failures.

But as we have proclaimed this morning, Jesus arose! The amazing fact of his resurrection galvanized his frightened followers, who had been all too ready to disappear into the woodwork after his arrest. They began to preach his message boldly again, even publicly scolding the

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religious leaders who had handed him over to the Romans for execution. They understood, as we should, that Easter morning validated the life and work of Jesus in a way that nothing else could. That God should raise him up placed the Almighty's seal of approval on all that Jesus said and did, from his proclamation that the Kingdom of God was breaking into the world to his mighty acts of healing and feeding to his insistence that care for the poor and weak were the marks of a life in harmony with God and even his outrageous assertion that he had seen God and was the Son of the Father.

There can be little doubt that the disciples of Jesus understood this from the earliest days after the miracle of the empty tomb. In Acts, Luke records the tradition of Peter's first public sermon on the Day of Pentecost. Listen to these key points: "You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power... This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear... Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

The aforementioned Paul, whose letters were probably the first books of our New Testament to be written, also understood the resurrection as the sure sign of God's exaltation of Jesus. In a passage that many of you by now will know is one of my favorites, Paul raises a hymn to the Crucified and Risen One: "And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." We would not have these words to inspire us today if Jesus had stayed dead and Rabbi Saul had written a eulogy for Rabbi Yeshua. But because Jesus rose — because, as my sister and brother preachers in the Black church tradition put it, "He got up!" — because of that, we have a completely different story. Our story is not about a dead rabbi but about a living Lord whose power continues to change our lives day after day.

The love and power of Jesus works within us to change us day after day. We read in Lamentations that "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning..." That steadfast love of God that raised Jesus also gives God's people fresh start after fresh start, as we need it. I noticed yet again in our Scripture for this morning that the resurrection of Jesus gives a fresh start to his disciples, who needed it badly. Jesus said to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, "go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." Go back to where we started, in other words. I'm going to let you start again. What beautiful news that must have seemed to them!

Around this time of year, I almost always listen to the rock opera "Jesus Christ Superstar." I love the creative way in which the lyrics of Tim Rice and the music of Andrew Lloyd Weber

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make the old, old story of the last days of Jesus seem as if they were happening here and now. I remember being introduced to “Superstar” when I was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade by a classmate whose dad was a hip young professor at Concordia Lutheran Seminary in St. Louis. I was so captivated that I soon had my own copy of the two-LP set, although it could only be had as an import from England at that point and cost a whopping \$21, which was big money for a ten-year old in 1970. I soon had all the lyrics by heart so I was highly affronted when I went to see the movie that Norman Jewison made in 1973 and discovered that the lyrics I so loved had been changed in places. There was even a whole new song, which I later learned had been written for the Broadway production, “Could We Start Again Please?” It’s a duet with Mary Magdalene and Peter and comes just after Peter has thrice denied even knowing Jesus. Once I got over my prejudice against it as a rank adulteration of the perfect original (I was a bit of an inerrantist in certain matters in those days), I realized it was quite a lovely little number and, oh, so true for all of us who seek to serve God. Peter sings, “Wish I could talk to you and tell you how I feel. / I’ve been very careless, / This I don’t deny, / But could we start again please?”

If anybody needed a fresh start, it was Peter. Once again, he’d really put his foot in it. Do you remember the story? Jesus had predicted at their last supper together on Thursday night that Peter would deny him and Peter protested vociferously. “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you... Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” But when the time to stand and be counted came, Peter fled with the rest. And when he came creeping around the high priest’s house where Jesus had been taken to find out what was going on and people started recognizing him, he did deny, cursing and swearing that he did not even know the man. The Gospel According to John tells us that Jesus made Peter squirm a little when the disciples met the Risen Lord in Galilee. He made Peter affirm his love three times, just as he’d denied him three times. But clearly Peter knew that his fresh start had been granted, for there he is in the Book of Acts, back to his old place front and center among the disciples, preaching that great first sermon on Pentecost and going on to be first a leader in the church of Jerusalem and later, according to tradition, the church in Rome. The resurrection of Jesus provided Peter with a fresh start.

The Apostle Paul traces the clear relationship between the resurrection of Jesus and fresh starts for all of us in a couple of his letters. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he wrote: “Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.” The death and life he is writing about here is the spiritual death we experience when we are separated from God through our own brokenness, bad choices and rebellion and the spiritual life, the eternal or abundant life, that we find in relationship with Christ Jesus. Perhaps this is clearer in a slightly longer passage in the sixth chapter of his letter to the Romans: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death

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no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” To put it simply, when Jesus was raised by God, the power of sin and death were broken. When we also trust in God, when we allow ourselves to believe that the promise of a fresh start is for us as well, then the power that our failures have over us is broken, too. We are no longer enslaved to the bad choices we have made in the past. We are forgiven, we are renewed, we can start again with real hope of living more and more closely to way of Jesus, which is a full and rich and wonderful life.

The news of Jesus’ resurrection and the new start which it gave the disciples and continues to give us is more than enough good news for any day, even an Easter Sunday. But I want us to consider one more point this morning. Friday was Earth Day, the forty-first observance of that day devoted to promoting the care of God’s good Earth, and the longstanding tradition of this congregation is that we should note the following Sunday with our own emphasis on Creation Care and with a picture of our children, the next generation of God’s stewards of the planet. It is right and proper, then, to recall that in his defeat of the power of death Jesus is revealed not just as the Messiah of the Jews, not just as Lord of all humankind but as the Word through whom all things came into being and in whom all things hold together, the Cosmic Christ. As the Risen Lord offers a new start to each of us, then, so does Christ Jesus offer a new start to creation itself.

Paul also addresses the idea of redemption for the cosmos in his letter to the Romans. The creation, he says, is waiting for us, for humankind, to take our rightful place as the forgiven and renewed people of God so that the whole world may be freed from the consequences of our fallenness: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” As humankind turns to God, so a fresh start is offered to the home of humankind. In our Easter freedom, we carry the key to the freedom of our beautiful Earth.

Imagine what a celebration Earth Day could be if all the people who owe their new life to Christ were to take seriously their duties to the Creation of which Jesus is Lord. It was around the time of that first Earth Day that the folk-rock supergroup, “Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young,” released their version of Joni Mitchell’s song, “Woodstock,” in which they sing, “we got to get ourselves back to the garden.” If the fresh start of humankind under the resurrection power of Christ Jesus means a return to the beginning, just as Jesus’ disciples returned to their beginnings in Galilee, then we must take up with renewed vigor the initial call of the Creator upon us to “till the earth and to keep it,” keeping it with the same love promised to us in the great blessing of Aaron, “May the Lord bless you and keep you...” If today, we count ourselves among the redeemed, the forgiven, the ones with fresh starts, members of the Body of Christ, then we must ask ourselves if we are doing all that we can do to keep God’s good Creation as God entrusted it to us.

My sisters and my brothers, we proclaim this day that Christ is risen indeed and we shout and sing alleluia, praise be to the God of Israel for this miracle of love. We give praise to God not

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simply because he overturned the injustice perpetrated on a good and holy man, Jesus of Nazareth, but even more because in this cosmos-changing act, that same Jesus, the gentle friend of children and the weak, the fiery young prophet of God's justice, the masterful storyteller, that Jesus was revealed as the Christ, the anointed one of God and more, as the true revelation of God Godself. In the resurrection of Jesus, his disciples recognized their own fresh start in life, the life that Jesus had promised, abundant and eternal. As the disciples of Jesus in this time and place, we too claim that promised life and in return we seek to live so as to honor the Lord we love, to follow his teaching to love God and neighbor and to faithfully act as stewards of the Earth which the Abba of Jesus called very good. Now the green blade rises, from the still-living body of Jesus whom the powers thought they had buried forever, from the holy image of God within each of us and from the springtime Earth where we live. Let us prepare to go from this place to till and keep all these tender shoots – the Body of Christ of which we are a part, the new life within each of us which God has freely given, and the beautiful planet for which we are responsible. May God bless us in all these endeavors and grant us a harvest with an increase ten and a hundred fold. Amen.