

## The Last Enemy

The way Luke tells the story probably captures the reaction of Jesus' friends pretty well. Whatever the details of what happened that day (and they are different in each telling of the story), we can be sure that the unprecedented and so far unrepeated events produced, as our translation of Luke puts it, perplexity, terror, and amazement. It's hardly surprising. They had, after all, seen their friend arrested, beaten, and killed just two days previous. They had hustled his corpse to a borrowed tomb nearby before they ran out of time to prepare for the Sabbath, fully intending to come back and do better for him when their piety told them it was permissible. But now, his body was gone and they were being told that he had been brought back to life, first the women by mysterious strangers, then the male disciples by the women, and no one really knew what to think. Unprecedented. Perplexing. Terrifying. Amazing.

We do a pretty good job in 21<sup>st</sup> century Western culture of neutering those strong emotional reactions to this story. For our culture as a whole, Resurrection Sunday has become much more about the natural cycle of the seasons and the fecundity of nature than about a miracle of life ripped from death. Even the name by which we call this day, Easter, is simply an updated spelling of the name of a Germanic pagan goddess of the dawn, spring, and fertility. Don't get me wrong: I've got nothing against bunnies or brightly colored eggs and I think it's good and proper to celebrate this beautiful time of year on the planet for which our Loving Creator made us stewards. But the friendly anthropomorphic rabbits and baskets of chocolate and dyed eggs have very little to do with the shocking events of that famous first day of the week. Unprecedented. Perplexing. Terrifying. Amazing.

Lest we feel as if we have somehow failed in our duty to God by downplaying the enormous emotional impact of Jesus' resurrection, let me hasten to point out that our brother Paul does much the same in the early part of the fifteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians. Corinth, we must remember, was one of the great hubs of philosophy in Paul's time and the members of the still-new Church in that city would perhaps have been more influenced by philosophy and logic than by emotional storytelling. And Paul, as a good Pharisee, excelled at carefully constructed argument. And so he begins the chapter-long teaching on the resurrection which includes our passage this morning with a relatively dry, "Joe Friday, just the facts, ma'am," recapitulation of the story which they'd all heard: "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

I don't think it's unfair to say that Paul's recitation fails to stir us to perplexity, terror, or amazement. His following argument, on the other hand, has all the passion his storytelling lacks. He is intent to show the Corinthians that it matters a great deal that Christ has been raised and that because he has been raised there is a new reality for us all. Just as the story of Adam and his sin in the Garden of Eden epitomizes the experience of every human being in willfully choosing evil over good at some point in life, so does the story of the resurrected Jesus epitomize the ultimate destiny our Loving Creator has in mind for us all: forgiveness, blessing, and new life.

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Paul wants to make sure, however, that his Corinthian friends understand that this ultimate destiny is not to be fulfilled overnight. Although the resurrection of Jesus is proof that the Good News he preached and lived out will be the final outcome of humankind's journey, the journey must still be travelled. As Paul puts it, "all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

I want to explore the significance to us of that last sentence but first I want to ask if it rings any bells for anyone outside its use in Paul's argument? Do you remember the appearance of that phrase in the magical world of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter? I must confess that I was a late adopter of that literary and filmic juggernaut. I read the first three books in a rush in 2001 in order to catch up with Connie, Colleen, & Sean before the first movie came out. But even before I read the books, I was aware of the controversy attached to them by some of my more conservative Christian brothers and sisters. For those folks, anything that smacks of magic and features witches and wizards in heroic roles is beyond the pale. I quickly found in my own reading that Ms. Rowling's young protagonist and his friends were pretty clearly on the side of the angels – their characters and struggles were virtuous. I came to suspect that J.K. Rowling was following in the footsteps of some other famous English writers of fantasy such as C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, thinly disguising Christian allegory behind tales of wonder. By the time the final book came out, I was convinced of it and Harry's trip with Hermione to Godric's Hollow sealed my suspicion. It was there, in the churchyard of the village where he'd briefly lived with his parents, on Christmas Eve, no less, that Harry discovered two tombstones which pointed him toward the successful resolution of his quest. The first was at the family tomb of his old teacher, Albus Dumbledore. On the headstone of Dumbledore's mother and sister, the epitaph read, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also;" words from Jesus himself. And the second, on the tombstone of Harry's parents, is the verse from Paul: "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death."

At first, Harry doesn't know what to make of either of these inscriptions. But Hermione, whether because she was raised in the faith or simply due to her polymath nature, clues Harry in to their Biblical references. To the second epitaph, she says, "It means . . . you know . . . living beyond death. Living after death." If you've somehow avoided knowing the denouement of the Potter series, you might want to cover your ears for this next part. Harry does, in fact, discover the reality of living beyond death. He decides that there are things more important than being The Boy Who Lived, things that are worth dying for. And so, in seeking to save his friends without sparing himself, he is able to defeat the embodiment of death in his world, Lord Voldemort, and finds that he is restored to life as well.

Rowling, it seems, does not mean for her Harry Potter to be a "Christ figure" but rather a Christian figure. Although Christianity as a religion comes into the story only in that brief graveyard scene, Harry and his friends are nevertheless learning to live in the virtues espoused by the Scriptures. Ultimately, the lesson taught by Jesus, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends," is not only one that Jesus himself lived out but one that all of us are called, in some way, to live out. Far from being a wicked plot to lure children away

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from the Church, Rowling's young students of magic are actually exemplars of how to live a life pleasing to God. Like Paul and all the best writers of fiction, J.K. Rowling fully understands that the last enemy to be destroyed is death. Her protagonist and his friends are in constant danger of death, just as Paul was. Even at the end of the book, we know that death ultimately awaits. Some beloved characters are killed and not restored. But we see that virtue has triumphed and that death, ultimately, need not be feared.

In bringing this clear-eyed view of life to her work, Rowling does indeed follow in the footsteps of her aforementioned predecessors, Tolkien and Lewis. Like Harry, Tolkien's Frodo Baggins is not a substitute for Jesus; he is not Christ but Christian – or, given the conceit of Tolkien's Middle-Earth, pre-Christian. Frodo is willing to give his life for his friends and though he turns away from death as he reaches his goal in Mordor and the unforeseen actions of the ruined hobbit, Gollum, actually save the day, Frodo is the kind of selfless hero we would call a saint, were he real and human rather than fictional and hobbit. Things are a little different in Lewis' Narnia for his Christ-figure, Aslan, is truly meant to be a portrayal of the Second Person of the Trinity manifest for another world.

But in all three stories, Paul's truth holds. Death is the last enemy to be destroyed. Harry Potter, Frodo Baggins, and Aslan, all three, must confront death. The first two characters, though they succeed in their quests, are diminished by death and still ultimately subject to its ravages just as we are. Aslan, as the son of the Emperor Over the Sea, conquers death but the Pevensie children and all the folk of Narnia must still pass beyond death's shores. Yet as we read these books, we are left with a sensation of uplift, with the feeling that death's power over these beloved characters and over we ourselves has been diminished and, at the last, defeated.

My point in this long discursus into modern British Literature is that these stories that reflect the Resurrection ethos are important for us. At a time when our culture wants to rush us through the glorious and dreadful week between the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and the Triumph over the Tomb on Resurrection Sunday, perhaps we need these imaginative tales to get us to slow down and realize the way that the resurrection works out in our lives. If we are rushing through our readings of the admittedly terse Gospels and the downright abrupt Paul, perhaps we need some time with the three volumes of The Lord of the Rings, or the seven book sets of Harry Potter or the Chronicles of Narnia to remember that the self-centeredness of Voldemort and the other antagonists is not the way to life. Their way is death itself.

We must take our time with this because it is crucial. If we pretend that all is well because Christ arose, then we fail to take seriously the ongoing challenge of bringing the Beloved Community to full life. If we ignore the continued presence of death in our world, we abrogate the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, "Our Father... Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We are not there yet and to assume that we are will only leave us wide open to disappointment and disillusionment. Our loved ones will continue to be touched by death and by its handmaidens: disease, poverty, war, violence. And yet...

And yet, there is good news. Because Christ arose, we know what the true ending for all of us is. Regardless of the spirits of empire and greed, regardless of the predations of sickness and addiction, regardless of the violent and the hateful, there is life beyond death. Those powers,

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which seem so daunting to us, cannot finally defeat us for we are the beloved of the Creator. And since we are ultimately victors, through Christ, we may live lives that show no fear of death or death's companions. We are free to be generous, free to be loving, free to be merciful and humble. We are free to love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength and our neighbor as ourselves. We are free to love our enemies, free to bless those who persecute us, because their enmity and their hurt to us are only for a moment, only while death continues to flail about in the death-throes of death itself. But death, already defeated, shall be destroyed.

The story of the resurrection of Jesus is the old, old story, the wonderful story. Unprecedented. Perplexing. Terrifying. Amazing. We hear its echoes in the stories of our time and we rejoice. Through the Gospel writers and through these other men and women of faith, God calls to us to join our lives with the Source of Life. Our strength and our song is God, source of our salvation. We will not, at the last, die; we will live – to tell the deeds of the Living God. “The men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.”” He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen.