



EASTER – MYSTERY AND REALITY

April 16, 2017, Easter Sunday

John 2:1-6; I Corinthians 15:14; 19; 35-38; 41-42a

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Theme: Resurrection is both mysterious and real.

Almighty God, You transcend mortal imaginings; Your truth lies on the far side of the most articulate of words; time and again Your power overpowers our modest expectations. Startle us this Easter Day. Surprise us with a word beyond any mortal mind can imagine or might expect. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Late last fall I had a memorable lunch with a woman named Elisabeth Sifton. She's a retired book editor with a string of best sellers behind her. She's in her 80s, delightful, smart as a whip and likes murder mysteries as much as do I. She's also the daughter of a man who was arguably the most important American theologian of the 20th Century – Reinhold Niebuhr.

For most of his long career, Niebuhr taught theology at Union Theological Seminary in Morningside Heights here in the City. Theologically, Niebuhr was a moderate. Today at Union, he'd probably be a bit of a conservative. His daughter told us a story over lunch about the time back in the '40s or '50s when several of Niebuhr's students complained to the seminary administration about her father. They complained about him because, they said, Niebuhr didn't believe in the "literal" – or maybe she said "physical" – Resurrection of Jesus.

I've read a lot of what Reinhold Niebuhr wrote over his prolific career, and I can assure you that the man was an orthodox Christian and that he did indeed believe in the Resurrection. So what were the students upset about? Here's my guess.



They probably thought that there are just two ways to understand the Resurrection, and it's one or the other.

One of their ways to understand Resurrection is to take every detail in the Bible about Easter morning completely literally. The other alternative, and I'm guessing this is the one the students mistakenly attributed to Niebuhr, would be to shrink Easter to mere myth, nothing more than a dramatized Biblical metaphor for hope and newness of life, an allegory of good winning out over evil, a sweet spring symbol for all the nice stuff. My hunch is that those students probably thought that because Niebuhr was not a Biblical literalist, he was taking God out of Easter, secularizing it, reducing it to a vernal fete of optimism, daffodils and Easter bunnies.

Last Wednesday I preached an Easter sermon about like that. I preached it to a congregation of three-year-olds. It was the weekly Day School Chapel service and the assigned theme for the day was "New Life." For my sermon, I'd gone outside to one of Brick Church's tree wells on Park Avenue and dug up a blooming tulip, bulb and all. I showed it to the little ones, showed them the bloom of the lavender-colored petals and the long green leaves. Then I pointed out the dirty white bulb at the bottom out of which such loveliness had grown. I told the kids that last fall someone had planted the bulb in the dirt and that it had slept there all winter, slept through the cold and the rain and the snow. And then when the weather turned warm and the sun shone bright, the tulip bulb pushed its life up out of the cold earth and became this beautiful thing. Such sentiment may have been fit for three-year-olds who aren't ready for crucifixion, graves and Resurrection. But my little Chapel sermonette was not a proclamation of the Resurrection. It was a *bonbon* of spring romanticism for children – hopeful and chipper – but not grown-up Resurrection. That little sermon was probably what Reinhold Niebuhr's students were afraid he believed because he wasn't a literalist.

At the other end of the Easter theological spectrum is that very empirical literalism Niebuhr eschewed. Truth is that Niebuhr – indeed most Christians over the last 2,000 years – have actually *not* been literalists. When applied to Easter, literalism tries to take the Resurrection narratives in the four Gospels and Paul's several



Resurrection sermons embedded in his letters as merest documentary. “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that’s that. But “that” is *not* “that.”

That’s *not* that because, first off, anybody who’s read Matthew, Mark, Luke and John will quickly note that their individual tellings of the Easter story are different. The basic narrative is the same, but more than a few details are not. And many of those details are baffling. In the Resurrection story from John we heard a moment ago, Mary Magdalene doesn’t recognize the Risen Christ on Easter morning; she mistakes him for the gardener. Only when He speaks does she recognize Him. Equally enigmatic, the Risen Christ has wounds and eats just like you and me, yet he also walks through walls. The Risen Christ doesn’t have a body like us, but the Gospel writers are careful to say that He’s not a ghost.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians from which we heard earlier, Paul struggles mightily for words to speak of Resurrection. He tangles himself up in brave metaphors groping to explain the inexplicable: “*What I am saying...*” he writes, “*is that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit imperishability. Listen,*” he confesses, “*I will tell you a mystery...*” Paul waxes poetic in his effort to speak of that which is beyond words: “*There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars, star differs from star in glory. So it is with the resurrection.*” The Bible uses words like ‘fear,’ ‘perplexed,’ ‘terrified,’ and ‘amazed’ to describe the disciples’ reaction to Resurrection. The fact is that Easter stories in the Bible simply defy literalism. They defy literalism for a good reason. They defy literalism because the Easter mystery is the other side of literal words. No mortal words, not even Bible words, are sleek enough to speak the lightning of what happened Easter morning.

So if you’re *not* a literalist, yet believe Easter to be way more than a sweet spring orgy of optimism and good attitude, what’s a Christian to believe? My answer is necessarily personal. When it comes time in a worship service to say the ancient Apostles’ Creed, the creed that includes the words, “*I believe in the resurrection of the body,*” I speak those words confidently and unabashedly. I can do so because I’m confident of three things about Easter that lead me to boldly affirm that “*I (do indeed) believe in the Resurrection of the body.*”



The first is this. I confess biological agnosticism about the empirical details of Resurrection. The people who were there – eyewitnesses – were themselves baffled. They were perplexed by the forensic, biological details. They used the best words they could to grasp the barest hem of the mystery. And if *they* didn't know, *I* certainly can't know. And you know what? *I don't need to know the details.*

The second is this. I confess that Resurrection means the perseverance of individual identity. This promise is clearly implied in having a body, because a body means individuality. Mary recognized Jesus in the garden, which declares that Jesus was not absorbed into some cosmic, undifferentiated life mass. Nor shall we be. Who we *are* now will be – somehow – thrust forward into eternity. In His Resurrection, Christ is who He was, and in eternity we shall be who we are. That is to say, God does not love and save us *en masse*; God loves us for who we are and God saves us in our individuality.

Finally, and to my mind most crucially, I trust the consistent witness of Scripture, which is emphatic in declaring that it is God who *wills* and *does* Resurrection. Resurrection is no mere internal human psychological or even interior spiritual experience. Resurrection is somehow *objective*, not merely subjective. What I mean – and what I believe – is this: Resurrection is not “in” or “from” us. Resurrection is “in” and “from” God. We did not do it; we do not do it. God has done it and does it – not you, not me. Paul is exactly right when he declares to the Corinthians that “*if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain...*”

A fine essay in yesterday's *Wall Street Journal* made this very point very eloquently. In a piece entitled “The Christian Passover,” R. R. Reno writes that Easter is not “*a simple springtime celebration of life. The resurrection of Jesus reveals something more urgent and shocking: God favors the sons of Adam with a triumphant love in the person of Jesus, the Christ. And that love does not fend off or parry death, but destroys it, just as light overcomes darkness.*”



However you personally understand the objective details of what happened on Easter morning, Resurrection is the definitive affirmation that, with God, the governing power of the cosmos is not the death of Good Friday. By God, *life* – both in the now and life eternally – is the ultimate reality of the universe. The very core of the Christian faith is this audacious trust that in the end – believe it or not cynical world – *life* really is the last word.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.