

From Death to Life

For the children:

I'd like to read a book to you today. It's one of my favorites.¹

Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away.
So he said to his mother, "I am running away."
"If you run away," said his mother, "I will run after you.
For you are my little bunny."

"If you run after me," said the little bunny,
"I will become a fish in a trout stream
and I will swim away from you."

"If you become a fish in a trout stream," said his mother,
"I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you."

"If you become a fisherman," said the little bunny,
"I will become a rock on the mountain, high above you."

"If you become a rock on the mountain high above me,"
said his mother, "I will be a mountain climber,
and I will climb to where you are."

"If you become a mountain climber,"
said the little bunny,
"I will be a crocus in a hidden garden."

"If you become a crocus in a hidden garden,"
said his mother, "I will be a gardener. And I will find you."

"If you are a gardener and find me,"
said the little bunny, "I will be a bird
and fly away from you."

"If you become a bird and fly away from me,"
said his mother, "I will be a tree that you come home to."

"If you become a tree," said the little bunny,
"I will become a little sailboat,
and I will sail away from you."

"If you become a sailboat and sail away from me,"
said his mother, "I will become the wind
and blow you where I want you to go."

"If you become the wind and blow me," said the little bunny,
"I will join a circus and fly away on a flying trapeze."

¹ *The Runaway Bunny*, by Margaret Wise Brown (Harper & Row, 1942).

*"If you go flying on a flying trapeze," said his mother,
"I will be a tightrope walker,
and I will walk across the air to you."*

*"If you become a tightrope walker and walk across the air,"
said the bunny, "I will become a little boy
and run into a house."*

*"If you become a little boy and run into a house,"
said the mother bunny, "I will become your mother
and catch you in my arms and hug you."*

*"Shucks," said the bunny, "I might just as well
stay where I am and be your little bunny."*

*And so he did.
"Have a carrot," said the mother bunny.*

Let's pray:

God, today on Mother's Day, we give thanks for the way mothers love us. It reminds us of your love for us. Thank you. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, I want to call your attention to the good news that I preached to you, which you also received and in which you stand. You are being saved through it if you hold on to the message I preached to you, unless somehow you believed it for nothing. I passed on to you as most important what I also received: Christ died for our sins in line with the scriptures, he was buried, and he rose on the third day in line with the scriptures. He appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve, and then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at once—most of them are still alive to this day, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me, as if I were born at the wrong time. I'm the least important of the apostles. I don't deserve to be called an apostle, because I harassed God's church. I am what I am by God's grace, and God's grace hasn't been for nothing. In fact, I have worked harder than all the others—that is, it wasn't me but the grace of God that is with me. So then, whether you heard the message from me or them, this is what we preach and this is what you have believed.

So if the message that is preached says that Christ has been raised from the dead, then how can some of you say, "There's no resurrection of the dead"? If there's no resurrection of the dead, then Christ hasn't been raised either. If Christ hasn't been raised, then our preaching is useless and your faith is useless. We are found to be false witnesses about God, because we testified against God that he raised Christ, when he didn't raise him if it's the case that the dead aren't raised. If the dead aren't raised, then Christ hasn't been raised either. If Christ hasn't been raised, then your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins, and what's more, those who have died in Christ are gone forever. If we have a hope in Christ only in this life, then we deserve to be pitied more than anyone else.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead. He's the first crop of the harvest of those who have died. Since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead came through one too. In the same way that everyone dies in Adam, so also everyone will be given life in Christ. Each event will happen in the right order: Christ, the first crop of the harvest, then those who belong to Christ at his coming, and then the end, when Christ hands over the kingdom to God the Father, when he brings every form of rule, every authority and power to an end. It is necessary for him to rule until he puts all enemies under his feet. Death is the last enemy to be brought to an end ...

Listen, I'm telling you a secret: All of us won't die, but we will all be changed—in an instant, in the blink of an eye, at the final trumpet. The trumpet will blast, and the dead will be raised with bodies that won't decay, and we will be changed. It's necessary for this rotting body to be clothed with what can't decay, and for the body that is dying to be clothed in what can't die. And when the rotting body has been clothed in what can't decay, and the dying body has been clothed in what can't die, then this statement in scripture will happen:

*Death has been swallowed up by a victory.
Where is your victory, Death?
Where is your sting, Death?*

(Death's sting is sin, and the power of sin is the Law.) Thanks be to God, who gives us this victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

1 Cor. 15:1-16, 51-57 (C.E.B.)

For the adults:

Over the years, I've had my own internal debate – and sometimes an ongoing debate with worship leaders – about which is more important: Christmas or Easter? Without Christmas, there could be no Easter. Without Easter, Christmas has no meaning.

Theologically speaking, it's about Incarnation and Resurrection. Which is more important?

And maybe the debate is only a pointless intellectual exercise, the kind of argument Paul tells Timothy to avoid (2 Tim. 2:23). But there is no question where Paul lands on this issue. Easter is more important.

You could argue that's why we worship on Sunday rather than Saturday. Saturday is the Sabbath. But most Christians gather on "the first day of the week" because that is the day Jesus was raised from the dead (Jn. 20:1 and others). Every Sunday ever since has been a celebration of Easter.

In other words, the Resurrection takes precedence over the Incarnation. That's part of why the church calendar names today as the seventh Sunday *of* Easter, not the sixth Sunday after Easter.

We are a Resurrection people.

But in Corinth, like much of American culture today, Paul encounters people who deny the power of the resurrection. And he goes to great lengths to enshrine it as the hallmark of the Christian faith. It is so important the early church creeds include the profession, "I believe in the resurrection of the body."²

Now, the truth is that almost every creed was written to exclude people rather than include them. For that reason, Mennonites, like Methodists, shy away from using them on a regular basis. We are more interested in making people feel welcome in the life of the church rather than separating us from one another.

At the same time, Paul argues you cannot be a Christian if you don't believe in the resurrection.

And there are people in Corinth who deny it (1 Cor. 15:12). So many people, in fact, that Paul feels compelled to address it directly. Paul devotes the entire 15th Chapter of this Epistle to this one issue.

The essence of Paul's argument is that if you don't believe in resurrection, there really is no basis for your faith (1 Cor. 15:17). It seems to be a rather weak argument, in my opinion. It's almost circular to say that if you don't believe in the resurrection then you can't believe in God and your faith is null and void.

- It's like saying that if you don't believe in Democracy, then your votes don't matter, and you may as well live under the reign of a dictator. Conversely, Paul might argue, since you live in the U.S., you must believe in Democracy.

² The Apostle's Creed (*Voices Together*, # 923)

- Or maybe it's like saying that if you don't accept Anabaptist traditions, you're wasting your time worshipping in a Mennonite Church. The very fact that you are here is an expression of your belief.

I don't know about you, but those arguments don't seem very strong to me. I'm not sure they would be effective at changing my mind, either. But I do wonder why anyone would *not* believe in the resurrection and still claim to be a part of the Church. What is so troubling about the resurrection?

The resurrection is evidence of God's power. It's proof of eternity and the eternal nature of God's grace.

So what could be so troubling about it?

Why would there be people in Corinth who don't believe it?

More to the point for us, why are there still people who choose not to believe in the resurrection of the body?

At the bottom of the doubts is the realization that it doesn't make sense. We can't explain it scientifically, and we live in a scientific culture where things must be verifiable to be true.

In other words, to believe in the resurrection requires faith. And some people don't know if they have faith.

They know about faith.

They can recite Creeds.

They not only have a Bible, they can also read the Bible.

But that's not the same as faith.

It's safe to talk *about* faith. It's safe to talk *about* God. It's safe to talk *about* prayer. It may even be safe to talk *about* resurrection.

But it requires faith to believe.

I remember a High School student who came to talk to me once. She was writing a paper on Christianity and wanted to know about it. After I tried to explain what we believe, after I suggested some books to read – after she left my office, in fact – I realized she wanted a 'safe' and objective perspective. It was clear that she was intentionally keeping her ideas in the intellectual realm.

She didn't want to be affected by faith, not mine or hers or anyone else's.

She just wanted to know about it.

She didn't want to have faith.

Those who don't believe in resurrection don't want to experience faith. They don't want to experience it because it may change the way they live, it may change the way they think, it may change the way they act.

In one of her posts online, Diana Butler Bass tells about the time when she was called into her boss's office where she was asked to do something she didn't want to do. The back story is complicated, but there had been a shift in the leadership. As a professor, she was being relegated to a meaningless job. When Diana was given the choice of taking this job or quitting, she quit.

She walked away.

She had no fall back position. She had not thought about doing anything other than teaching at this school. But now, she was walking away. To stay would have been to support something she didn't believe, to

live a lie, to be chained to the status quo rather than what she knew to be a sort of freedom that she didn't fully comprehend.

That's when she realized there can be no resurrection without death. Walking away was an invitation to live in the promise of resurrection. And she would not have become the renowned writer she has become if she had stayed.

As an Easter people, as a people who believe in resurrection, we see life differently. We see hope where there seems to be no hope. We see beyond death to the promise of new life.

Those who refuse to believe in resurrection want to maintain the status quo. They don't want change. They like the comfort of their current existence – even if they are not happy with it.

Unlike them, we say we believe in resurrection.

But I wonder, do we really?

Maybe we don't believe in it either. Maybe we are more like the Corinthians than we like to think.

When Lazarus died, both of his sisters approached Jesus with the same response, "If you had been here, our brother wouldn't have died" (Jn 11:21 & 11:32). What they meant was things would have remained the same if Jesus had been there.

Jesus' response was to say that he was the resurrection (Jn. 11:25). He came to change things. Martha and Mary thought the resurrection was limited to the end of time. But Jesus assures them that believing in the resurrection affects life now, not just in the hereafter.

Do you believe in the resurrection of the body?

And just to clarify, I am not talking about believing in the world of zombies. In the tradition of our faith, the body and soul are not separate. They are one and the same. Zombies have no soul. Saying we believe in the resurrection of the body is also a statement that we don't believe the soul exists without a body.

Do you believe in the resurrection of the body?

How has that been lived out in your life?

Where have you seen it lived out in the work and ministry of our church?

When you answer those questions, you will know whether or not you believe in the resurrection.

As for me, I know I believe in the resurrection. I can think of two distinct and profound times where I can point to my own resurrection, a resurrection of body and soul.

The first is one I've mentioned before. I had been serving a church that was draining the life out of me, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. When I left, I was spent. And it would have been easy to walk away from the church, to find other employment.

One of my predecessors at that church did that. He became a shoe salesman.

And, he told me later, he felt like a zombie. He was going through the motions of living without having a life.

I knew exactly what he meant. But I believe in the resurrection. So I sought out and was sent to a new church. That new church nurtured me back to health. They loved me back to life. They helped me experience the resurrection when all I could see was the bleakness of death. Resurrection was no longer a theoretical event for me.

The other place and time I have experienced that kind of new life came 18 months ago when I was asked to serve as your interim pastor. The death of our daughter was devastating to me. I had often said that she was the real pastor in our family. She taught us how to love, how to forgive, how to live. I just preached.

In retirement, she became my purpose for living. And without her, I didn't know what I could do. Like Mary and Martha, I wanted to return to the way things were.

But I believe in the resurrection, so I was willing to give my pain to God and see what would happen. That's when I was invited to come here. And you helped me find my voice, you nurtured my spirit back to life. You gave me purpose and meaning. Because of you, I am a new person.

In other words, I know I believe in the resurrection because I am living it.

When we give the pain and sorrow of difficult experiences to God, we find new life. We find new hope. God brought you into my life and the joy has returned.

I *know* there is resurrection.

And like Paul, I believe it is the key element of our faith. Without it, we may as well go home. With it, there is no limit to what God can accomplish through us.

Resurrection, in fact, allows Incarnation to take place as we reveal God's story in our lives.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Randy L Quinn
Hope Mennonite Church

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