

WHAT IS RESURRECTION?

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READING:

One reading today is from E. B. White, weaver of Charlotte's web and father of Stewart Little. In one of his essays he described his beloved wife Katherine as she aged and became ill, but still knelt to plant flower bulbs in autumn wind.

"As the years went by and age overtook her, there was something comical in her bedraggled appearance the small hunched-over figure, her studied absorption in the implausible notion that there would be yet another spring, oblivious to the ending of her own days, which she knew perfectly well was near at hand, sitting there with her detailed chart under those dark skies in the dying October, calmly plotting the resurrection."

SERMON:

Here we are on the day of resurrection. But what does that mean and could you also be one of those who calmly plots the resurrection? Can you live inspired by resurrection, as an assurance or source of confidence in the work you do? When the radical edge of the Christian Reformation came to Eastern Europe, it came in the person of Francis David. He said, "In this world there have always been many opinions about faith and salvation. [But] you need not think alike to love alike." Today I say that there have been many opinions about resurrection, but we need not think alike in order to plot and plan alike. I will put at least three opinions before you. The names I have given to three forms of resurrection are: Resurrection of the Body, Resurrection of the spirit, and Resurrection of the life. Perhaps one will seem more meaningful than the others, but do not simply reject the others. Hold them as alternate models, meaningful or even useful models of the truth that is beyond our understanding. In all of them a power is revealed: there is something greater than death and endings that we can be open to, there is always a power that can renew, restore and transform our lives. Eventually we are in need of resurrection, for death and ruin is part of this world.

The first idea, that of bodily resurrection arises in Christianity within the story of Lazarus who is told by Jesus to come up out of his tomb. The word resurrection literally means, "to rise again." Of course the central Christian image of resurrection is that of Jesus physically rising from the grave, especially in John's Gospel. I always liked the character of doubting Thomas in that Gospel. He has a great first name. Not "Thomas", but "Doubting." Thomas doesn't believe until he touches the wounds in Jesus' body, the wound of the Centurion's spear in his side, and the nail marks in his hands. In this story Jesus has the same body he had before he died.

The idea of resurrection is not attested in the early ideas of the Old Testament. The early Jewish writers all seem to share the Babylonian belief that all the dead go down to Sheol, a dark and dusty netherworld, or simply into an earthly grave. The one exception, Elijah's rise into the sky on the chariot, is not a story of resurrection but of avoiding death altogether. However, according to historical documents we can see that by about 200 B.C. E. various ideas about resurrection of the dead, though by no means universally, became widely discussed among the people of Israel. There were many disagreements over just who would rise, whether only some or all of the righteous, or

both the righteous and the wicked, and if this rising would be spiritual, or physical, or rather entail a transformation of the self into a glorious angelic form with some new physical body that is immortal and perfect.

Likewise, after the experience of the resurrection of Jesus, it took time for early Jewish-Christians to work out exactly what it all meant. The Gospels vary widely on exactly what happened, and the letters of Paul add another layer of speculation. In Paul's first letter to the Christians in Corinth this disagreement is acknowledged by the writer when he asks, "How can some of you say that there is not resurrection of the dead?" Some Christians believed that the resurrection of the body was only for special people or maybe for Jesus alone.

Now I like to point out that the miracle of people coming back to life after death is not quite a miracle anymore. People rise from the dead every day, in hospitals people die when their hearts stop and then are revived by efforts of doctors, or on the streets by paramedics. Only a few years back I read of a baby lost in the freezing cold. When her body was recovered it was assumed that she was dead, for no one could survive a night in such deep cold, and she seemed quite lifeless. But when they brought her indoors she surprised everyone by reviving to life, and growth, just as before. Dr. Sam Parnia who specializes in cardiac arrest patients, has written a book on the subject of resurrecting the dead titled *Erasing Death: The Science That Is Rewriting the Boundaries Between Life and Death*. Of course he says that death is not 'erased' but its boundaries are.

We like to hear these stories and speculations because they comfort us against the fear of death. And, it is not only our bodies, our own lives, that we cling to and hope are resurrected. Sometimes it is the loss of another that awakens a desire in us for resurrection. The poet Maria G. Farber wrote a poem called "Resurrection" when she was in the town of Fuengirola on the Costa del Sol, Spain.

I saw her clearly
beyond the store window.
I entered, as in a trance,
to stare, wordless, at her.

She was brilliantly alive:
her black eyes a welcome.
She was the resurrection
of the One who had died
Fuengirola, me Amor!

The longing to touch and see a person lost to death is tangible in this poem. On the other hand, one problem with the idea of bodily resurrection is that not all want to keep their bodies. Some of us find our bodies uncomfortable, sources of pain and suffering. I was visiting an assisted living apartment the other day when I heard a group of people talking about their ailments:

"My hands hurt so much I can barely hold a cup of coffee", said one.

"Yes" replied another, but your eyes are OK; my cataracts are so bad I can't even see my coffee", replied another.

"My body is so messed up I can't turn my head to see where my coffee is", said a third, to which several nodded in agreement.

My blood pressure pills make me dizzy," a bald old man another went on, "but I guess this all is the price we pay for getting old". Then there was a short moment of silence. "Well, it's not that bad" said one woman cheerfully. "Thank God, we can all still drive"!

Early Christians who believed in the resurrection wondered about people who were burned to death or dismembered. Many early Christians had thought that their relatives would be raised just like Lazarus when Jesus returned, but time was passing and bodies were rotting in graves and they began to wonder. This is not just a Christian question. The scripture Muslims responds to a general doubt about resurrection. In The Koran, Surah 22, verse 5, God says:

O men, if you are in doubt as to the Resurrection, surely We created you of dust, then of drops of sperm [and egg], then of a blood clot, then of a lump of flesh... And behold [when] the earth [is] blackened: then, when We send down water upon it, it quivers, and swells, and puts forth herbs of very joyous kind. That is because Allah, He is the truth and it is He who gives life to the dead, and it is He who is able to do all things.

This still does not explain exactly resurrection is. Paul talked of seed bodies, as are implied in this Koranic sura. So, some Christians say that they will get a new spirit body at the resurrection of the spirit. The roots of this idea are very basic. I remember a Unitarian woman at her 70th birthday saying, "My body and knowledge have changed much, but in some ways I still feel like the same person I was at 18 years old." The idea in resurrection is that this person survives death and gets a new body. Literally this is 're'-'incarnation,' with the root word 'carne' meaning body. The spirit gets re-clothed in a new body. Hindu faith has held this idea for eons, but they argue that this happens many times, over and over again. Humorously, Paul Krassner wrote, "I used to believe in reincarnation, but that was in a past life." A few Christians also hold this idea of repeated reincarnation, but for most in the West, incarnation "getting a body" happens only twice, once at birth, and once at the resurrection on the Day of Judgment.

In some views this second body is very physical, but for others it is more spiritual, or intangible, in nature. In Paul's first letter to Corinth he talks about a spiritual body being given to the resurrected, "The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown in a natural body, it is raised in a spiritual body." The implication is that the spirit is something different than the natural. The new body might be completely different, or it might just be a physical body that is somehow immortal and impervious to disease. Will we be like the angels, only extensions of God, or will we have personal pleasures and desires?

This lack of clarity is coupled with skepticism about the idea of the spirit. Throughout the ages some people have wondered, 'exactly what is this thing called the spirit, or soul?' The Buddha explicitly rejected the idea that there was a permanent enduring self, called "atman" in the philosophy of his day. Buddhists teachers say that if you really pay attention to the mind you find that it is not one thing but an aggregate of at least five different elements, thoughts, sensations, reactions to sensations, and so on. Likewise modern brain science has revealed that different parts of the brain produce different mental functions, all somewhat independent of each other. Self is more of a creation of many parts, just as is life itself. We know that if parts of the brain are altered

the personality of the one using that brain can also be radically altered. I think of people who have suffered through seeing a loved one be devastated by Alzheimer's disease. As you see a person lose essential memories, as that person forgets us, and parts of the personality that once seemed essential disappear altogether, when the person in the hospital seems nothing like the person one knew, it is easy to doubt that the person is there at all. Our relationship to that dying person seems utterly unlike what came before.

This leads me to consider the third form of resurrection, the resurrection of the life. The central idea here is that each individual living and dying is part of a larger, enduring, circle of Life itself. The question then is not whether your individual life will be resurrected, but in what from your life will endure and return through that great circle. In this form of resurrection the idea is that the same forces that created me, plus all that I have been, go on to create new life.

I have seen this form of resurrection. Once I walked through evergreen woods in the Rocky Mountains. Then, after a forest fire, I returned to the same place to find nothing but a moon-like desolation covered with blackened poles where trees had been. But then, years later, I saw thick aspen groves shading new evergreen plants, and I knew that the forest will be resurrected to live on that mountain again. There is a revival, and renewed life. This is the kind of resurrection spoken of by Virginia Hamilton Adair:

Green is happening. / Through the sweet expectant chill / Of a northern spring
We have gone without will, /
Without fear, without reason, / Trusting to the power / Of a fickle season,
Of a passionate hour, / To mature, to sustain / Till the plan uncovers / In the sun
and rain.

There, in that plan, is resurrection. Just as the daffodils will be cut short by frost one year, and then rise again abundantly the next, human life also revives. After a war, after an illness, after a loss, a person may feel wounded, weak, even dead, and later find their lives rising again. And, as the author Chuck Palahniuk wrote, "Only after a disaster can we be resurrected."

Sometimes a grandchild will seem uncannily like a grandparent long dead. The new person is not the old person, but embodies some of what that person was. A martyr to a cause is not necessarily born again, but their ideals and vision can be reborn to live in others. Jane Schaberg's wrote a book titled, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*. In it she argues that Mary was a powerful leader in the church who is being resurrected spiritually in the women who seek to lead the Christian church today.

I recently read a poem by a UU minister, "Eastering" by the Reverend Diane Moore. It is about the resurrection of her self-image from the death of her old vision of self. All her life she had struggled to fit the life that other people had made for her. She felt entombed by other's images of self. Then she found a place, a people and situation that allowed her to see herself not as "straight" or "normal" but something altogether new. Everything is changed by such a resurrection, body and spirit and mind.

Now, some might object to the use of the term resurrection to apply to all three different forms. They might say that I am misusing the word, or blurring important distinctions. In defense, I share with you a story. One day the late British scholar G. H. D. Cole rushed from his classroom at Oxford to catch the express train to London, but he

arrived late, just in time to see it pull away from the station. He resigned himself to waiting for the local train. Inexplicably, another express train, not scheduled to stop at Oxford, pulled to a stop at the platform. Cole opened the carriage door, entered the train and took a seat. As the train left the station the conductor appeared. "I am sorry sir," he said, "This train doesn't stop here!" Cole thought for a moment and said, "O yes, well then, I guess I did not get on." It does not matter what you call it. The resurrection train is waiting for you, ready for you to get on.

I end this sermon by reminding you of Katherine White in her garden, plotting the resurrection, and adding words from The poet-farmer Wendell Berry, in his poem "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer's Liberation Front." He asks us "every day" to "do something that won't compute..."

Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest
Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold...
Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees /every thousand years... Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts...
Practice resurrection.

So, on this Easter day, I encourage you to practice resurrection, in whatever form you think it might come, plan for it and hope for it. And may this day of resurrection be one of gladness and gratitude.

BENEDICTION: Isaiah 55:12

You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands.