

Sermon

Gospel: Luke 24:1-12

Pastor Dan Peterson
Easter Sunday, April 20, 2025

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, [the women] came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴ While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵ The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. ⁶ Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” ⁸ Then they remembered his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹² But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Grace to you, and peace, from God, the Source of life – and new life – and Jesus the Christ, who *is* that life, and new life, in the world. Amen.

The following story is inspired by an event that was shared with me by my good friend, Dr Michael Zbaraschuk of Pacific Lutheran University. He was teaching in class when a more fundamentalistic Christian student came up to him afterward and said, “Do you believe in the Resurrection?”

My friend Michael replied, “Of course, I try to live it every day.”

Something terrible has happened to the Christian faith. What began as something to be lived and experienced, has become a series of doctrines or teachings merely to be recited and believed. The Resurrection is a chief example. If you do not believe that the corpse of Jesus Christ was resuscitated or reanimated, the thinking goes, then you are not a true Christian. You are not an orthodox person of faith. Wow.

Now, to be clear, I do believe something seismic happened after Jesus’s death that grasped, shook, and transformed his early followers. If not, then, why were so many of them, including Stephen, Peter, and Paul, willing to die for their faith?

I’m not denying, in other words, the historicity of the Resurrection. The Bible makes it clear that *something* happened, and that the disciples experienced it, albeit in a variety of ways.

But here’s the problem: when we think of Resurrection primarily as something in the past we must believe, rather than an experience or way of life available to us in the

present, in the now – when we do this, we not only lose the meaning of the Resurrection, we also destroy its power.

Consider a famous poem by e. e. cummings. It's called "i thank You God [for most this amazing]." The syntax is idiosyncratic, so please listen closely:

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday;this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings:and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any – lifted from the no
of all nothing – human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

Obviously the resurrection here has absolutely nothing to do with belief. It's an experience. In the poem, for example, cummings talks about his experience of nature. He writes, "this is the sun's birthday," – and he spells it not S O N, but S U N – the birthday of life and of love and wings." He writes, when he says, "i, thank You God," he puts the letter i lowercase, and You, which he repeats in the last stanza, as a reference to God.

Hence, upon looking at nature, cummings wonders, how can anyone doubt the existence of God?

What we have, accordingly, is an experience of spiritual rebirth, an experience of new awakening, a sudden shift in consciousness, and a new appreciation, in this poem, for existence.

This shift in consciousness becomes all the more profound when we learn that e. e. cummings wrote this poem later in life, after he returned to his father, a pastor, after rebelling against him for decades since he attended college. It's a poem of gratitude and new awareness, predicated upon the experience of reconciliation with his father that is nothing short of resurrection.

Google-AI adds that “while experiencing the feeling of being reborn to a new perspective reflects one way of understanding the resurrection, it is not the Christian way of understanding the resurrection.”

Well, Google-AI, I could not disagree more! My brain, “human merely being,” is still worth something! Experiencing the risen Christ spiritually — that is, in a way, synonymous with the kind of new birth or new perspective gained by e. e. cummings — abounds in the New Testament.

To put it another way, many writers of the Bible spiritualize the Resurrection.

Consider the most widely-read author in the history of Western civilization: the Apostle Paul. (I was going to say, “me,” — I have written two books, but I’m pretty sure they’re nothing close to the kind of audience that Paul has had in Romans and Galatians.)

Paul treats the Resurrection spiritually, that is metaphorically, that is, figuratively, as a new way of life. It has nothing to do with the reanimation of a corpse. It’s an experience, rather, of dying to one’s selfish desires and being reborn.

In the words of the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “As a man or woman for others, I have been crucified with Christ.”

Paul writes, “So that it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. “Another former colleague, a man who is a priest of Zen Buddhism, told me that passage is a favorite among his colleagues. The Zen Buddhist loves it: only the ego wants to get into heaven.

Paul speaks here of a new kind of experience, one where the ego has died and Christ in him has been born. This is what I meant earlier when I said that the Resurrection was not primarily, or, I would emphasize exclusively, *belief* for the early Christians. like Paul, but an *experience* of spiritual rebirth: a new awakening, a shift in consciousness, a change in perspective, a new way of life. This is why Paul boldly declares in Second Corinthians that he is now “a new creation in Jesus Christ.”

And this is why the author of Colossians can say to his audience that they “have already been raised in Christ.” The Resurrection is an experience to be lived, a new way of life.”

Of course, in our highly individualistic culture of the Pacific Northwest, it is easy to reduce the Resurrection to something a person experiences in isolation, off by themselves, for example, in the woods. (By the way, I also can’t stand hiking. I just have to tell you, I don’t understand why people would take as a form of leisure walking uphill. It just makes no sense!)

Either way, the Resurrection is not simply something someone experiences in isolation. Instead, for the writers of the New Testament, it is almost always inseparable from what’s happening *here* — that is, Christian fellowship, Christian community.

The Gospel of Luke, for example, refers to the experience of the risen of Christ that occurs when two disciples break bread with a stranger in Jesus's name. The point is always the same: Resurrection is not primarily or exclusively a *belief*. It is something rather to be *experienced*, a new form of consciousness, a kind of breaking-through, a new way of seeing ourselves and the whole world around us.

Martin Luther captures this sentiment perfectly: "Our Lord," he says, "has written the promise of the Resurrection, not in books alone, but in every leaf of springtime."

Every leaf of springtime.

Do you seek new life, the kind that frees you from regret, or mistakes you may have made in the past? I do.

Do you want freedom from the tyranny of old habits you cannot seem to break? I do.

Would you like to see the world around you anew, the way e. e. cummings did, or be part of something bigger than yourself in fellowship, like this, with others? I certainly do.

Then stop simply believing in the resurrection and *live* it.

Your past does not define you. In Christ, your sins, your mistakes, your errors of judgment have all been forgiven.

Today is a new day. The resurrection is here and now.

now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened

Amen.