

Resurrection Hope
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Hebrews 11:1-3

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

The Universe

What if someone said to an embryo in the womb,
 “Outside of your world of black nothing
 is a miraculously ordered universe;
 a vast Earth covered with tasty food;
 mountains, oceans and plains,
 fragrant orchards and fields full of crops;
 a luminous sky beyond your reach,
 with a sun, moonbeams, and uncountable stars;
 and there are winds from south, north and west,
 and gardens replete with sweet flowers
 like a banquet at a wedding feast.

The wonders of this world are beyond description.
 What are you doing living in a dark prison,
 Drinking blood through that narrow tube?”
 But the womb- world is all an embryo knows
 And it would not be particularly impressed
 By such amazing tales, saying dismissively:
 “You’re crazy. That is all a deluded fantasy.”

One day you will look back and laugh at yourself.
 You’ll say, “ I can’t believe I was so asleep!
 How did I ever forget the truth?
 How ridiculous to believe that sadness and sickness
 Are anything other than bad dreams.”

Rumi

In the past seven days, I’ve found myself rethinking my faith through the eyes of progressive Christianity. Last Monday several of us heard retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong speak at California Lutheran University. Some of us heard him in the morning and again in the evening because his presence and his message were so compelling. Spong’s message is one of challenge and one of hope. Through his many books and articles and lectures Spong challenges traditional Christianity from the

Virgin Birth to the Resurrection. His challenge is spelled out best by the title of one of his best selling books *Christianity Must Change or Die...* where he takes to task the traditional after life system of reward and punishment, based on the images of heaven and hell that have become such a part of Christian vocabulary from a fundamentalist perspective

His hope lies in his conviction that Christianity is at its best when it calls us *to live fully, love wastefully, and be all that each of us has the capacity to be*. Yesterday, Frank and I attended the Northern Association Spring annual meeting in Bakersfield where Fred Plumer, the founding pastor of the UCC Irvine church shared his own perspective on the future of traditional Christianity. His perspective is unique because he is now the President of an organization called The Center for Progressive Christianity. How many of you are familiar with TCPC? In retrospect I wish I had encouraged a number of you to join us, because if UCCSimi is anything, it is a progressive church. Rather than see our work from the isolated vantage point of Simi Valley, I think its time to become part of the larger Progressive Network. [Council later voted to join] Hopefully, those of you who already have been exposed to these principles will join me in making our witness as a Progressive church stronger and more visible.

Like Spong and Plumer and the thousands of people who are currently walking across America to witness to a less caustic and more inclusive Christian witness, I do not believe Christianity should remain captive to a fundamentalist religious and political movement that thrives on fear and practices hate.

The why of that statement should be obvious, but rather than speak to what I am against, let me speak to what I believe is at the heart of being a Christian in the twenty first century. Christianity is a child of hope. Our faith is rooted in love, but hope is the flower that makes faith possible. The letter to the Hebrews proclaims that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Faith is also the assurance of hope itself. As we celebrate the liturgical season of Easter, we need to be reminded that without Easter there is no reason for being a Christian.

Easter is a celebration of resurrection: past and future. That much we share with Christians of every persuasion. Where Progressive Christians differ from our traditionalist brothers and sisters is in our understanding that resurrection is to faith as hope is to tomorrow. Without resurrection, there is no Christian message. Our traditionalist sisters and brothers want us to believe that the core of Christian faith is the cross because Jesus' crucifixion is a saving event.

Progressive Christianity reminds us that the cross and resurrection are one event not two. When the cross was separated from the resurrection as it was in the 4th century when Constantine institutionalized Holy Week, resurrection became a footnote for Christian faith rather than its founding moment. In its place Jesus' passion for abundant life was repackaged into passion plays. In these plays suffering love—Jesus' dying on the cross for us—not Jesus' resurrection is the main event. This distinction may seem like hair splitting to some, but when suffering love takes center stage in our faith it's not just love that suffers its faith itself. Why?

Because the theological moment when Jesus' death on the cross replaced Jesus' resurrection as the central witness to God's love for us, the assurance of things hoped for became eternal life for some not abundant life for all

This distinction can be seen best when you juxtapose John 3:16 with John 10. John 3:16--- most of you know—anyone hazard a guess? “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

How about John 10? There Jesus says **“I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”**

Progressive Christians live more by faith than fear...their faith rests in the hope of abundant life here and now for all people, which is why matters of justice are inseparable from our faith. Traditionalist Christians live more by fear than faith because death not life dominates their faith. They hold up the cross as a talisman of safety, believing that their best shot at life is the hope of heaven rather than hope in the here and now. They also put into practice an exclusive love not an inclusive love. That’s what the whole “left behind” book series advocates.

Where does your hope lie? Hoping in abundant life here and now is what resurrection hope is all about. To make this shift from heaven to here and now does not mean you have to reject life after death. It means living as if death is more friend than foe and rejecting images of reward and punishment in a heaven and hell after-life scenario. I may stir up more questions than answers for you today, but hope remains my central theme. Resurrection hope is the only hope worth having.

Resurrection involves imagination in action; it involves saying yes to life here and now and living the hope that ensues. It behooves all of us to work together for the good of all; to recognize our common humanity and see the Christian faith as a call to hope that is larger than any one life.

People who cannot find hope in this life will look for it anywhere they can—such is the appeal of heaven for those whose everyday life is nothing more than a living hell. Unfortunately, when you pin your hopes on a righteous judge named Jesus who will return at the end of time to right the wrongs of this world, faith becomes a manifesto of fear, where only the few deserve heaven’s rewards.

God’s power is not the inheritance of a few. That means that the hope to which we are called is not the hope of heaven but the hope of resurrection, not new life in an after-life but new life in *this* life. God calls us in Christ to reject self-centering hope and bring to life a hope for the world. Now before you say count me out, I’ve barely got my head above water, let me remind you that hope is relational not isolational.

Hope is a work in progress that requires attention through education... we need to learn the nature of hope to understand how it can make a difference, first in our life, then the life of the world. In the words of Václav Havel, former playwright and President of Czechoslovakia, **“Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”** Listen to some other perspectives:

Playwright Jean Kerr said it this way: **Hope is the feeling you have that the feeling you have isn’t permanent.**

Journalist and critic H.L. Mencken spoke of hope as “**a pathological belief in the occurrence of the impossible.**” Hope requires us to believe that life is good even when its hard. That’s where resurrection comes in...When we live as though resurrection is possible we believe in the power of God to change our circumstances... How do you live? Are you reaching for heaven or resurrection? It makes a difference you know.

The well known preacher William Sloane Coffin who recently died reminds us that it’s not enough to put our best foot forward...**real change happens when we pay attention to the other foot.** Resurrection is also courage on the move. Its truth-telling for the sake of well-being.

Hope never happens in a vacuum. It needs help from someone outside our immediate world of concerns who can help us see beyond the deadly habits of hopelessness and despair that we so often succumb to when left to our own devices. Charles Schultz the creator of those loveable Peanuts characters knew this well. In a classic scene Charlie Brown seeks help for his depression from Lucy who sits waiting in her counseling booth.

“I’m in sad shape,” Charlie says. “Good morning,” Lucy replies. “Sit right down.”

“Fine,” Charlie says, “I was afraid I might need an appointment. What can you do when you don’t fit in? What can you do when life seems to be passing you by?” Lucy looks at him and says, “Follow me, I want to show you something.

See the horizon over there?

See how big this world is?
See how much room there is for everybody?
Have you ever seen other worlds?

“No” Charlie says.

“As far as you know this is the only world there is right?” Lucy prods.

“Right.” Charlie says

“There are no other worlds for you to live in... right?”

“Right,” Charlie shrugs reluctantly.

“Well, live in it then!” Lucy barks “Five cents please.”

I know better than anyone, how hard it is to live in this world, when your inner world is full of sadness, pain and self-doubt; I also know that the hope to which we are called in Jesus name is no false hope. Resurrection hope is real and it has the power to transform not just own small worlds but everyone’s world for the better.

Hope is not something we possess like personal wealth. Hope is something towards which we walk; and walking, whether it be done physically or spiritually, takes energy—the truthful energy of love that helps us overcome the lies that so often become the daily bread of our existence: Remember what hope is? Hope is a pathological belief in the occurrence of the impossible! This is the hope to which you and I are called each and every day.

Where does your hope reside? What buoys you up? What keeps you moving towards God's love for all people? There are many hopeless places in the world that need us to live our hope. One of them is Dafur. [The following story and editorial information was paraphrased]

“Armani Tinjany, and she was a beautiful 29-year-old Sudanese teacher, tall and gracious in a flowing orange polka-dot dress tied to her thin waist.

She grabbed my hand and in clear English told me she had a college degree and taught Arabic and agriculture to high school students. She had lived a comfortable life with her family in a village of stone compounds.

A month before I met her, her village was attacked by Arab militias known as the Janjaweed -- slang for devils on horseback. The militiamen galloped into town, burned homes and buildings, raped women and killed dozens of men while government aircraft bombed the area. The assault was a strike back at rebels who had risen up against the Arab-led government, claiming economic and political discrimination.

In her rush to leave, Tinjany left her parents and her husband behind. Were they alive? She did not know.

"Are they going to leave us like this forever?" she asked. "My life, as I knew it, is finished."

“The most compelling humanitarian challenge of these times is to stop the genocide in Darfur. In the past three years, more than 400,000 people have been annihilated and more than 2 million driven from their homes by the National Islamic Front regime that rules Sudan and its proxies, Arab militias known as Janjaweed. And all that time -- while helicopter gunships were strafing villages, soldiers were raping women and girls, and Janjaweed raiders were smashing babies' skulls -- the nations of the world did little more than bemoan the complexities standing in the way of a life-saving mission. Now, they are even forcing cuts in United Nations food aid for lack of funding.

So it is heartening that private citizens from around the country are converging on Washington, D.C., for this afternoon's rally to end the genocide in Darfur. Some will see a film on Darfur in the morning at the National Holocaust Museum, a site that is all too fitting. Speakers at the afternoon rally will include clergy, human rights activists and scholars, and members of Congress. Among local figures scheduled to speak are the Rev. Gloria White-Hammond, chairwoman of the Million Voices for Darfur Campaign, Samantha Power, author of "A Problem from Hell: American and the Age of Genocide," and Representative Michael Capuano, co-chairman of the Congressional Sudan Caucus.

The spirit of the rally is captured in a quote from the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. that appears in the schedule of Sunday's events: "In the end, we will not remember the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." In the case of the Darfur genocide, it is not the silence of people but the silence of governments that is certain to echo down the corridors of history."

We, who have hope, need to extend the power of our hope to those whose living situations are nothing less than desperate. Resurrection hope is not a personal possession it is the essence of our faith...I pray that we will always help each other keep that faith working *here and now*.