

Easter Sunday 2009

Every Easter I face the same problem in preaching: to talk about a pre-Enlightenment idea, resurrection, to post-Enlightenment people. This difficulty becomes, perhaps, even more evident than usual in a quasi-academic community. I think we may identify the environs of OSU as a quasi-academic community. Resurrection gets talked about here as biology, or as cultural symbolism, or as a mythic structure, or in any one of a number of ways essentially modern. Such ways of speaking are the stock-in-trade of academic communities

But one of the things certain about all religions, and ancient religious documents, is that they are talking about something. They're talking about something, about some aspect of human experience they find important. The question is, "What?" or "Which?" And how can we, today, honestly articulate what that was? Or can we? Through the history of religions, one discovers that there is a protean flexibility to language about religious experience. Any given language pattern can be used to express different things, while those using the pattern usually believe that they mean by it what the first people to use the language meant by it.

Now I have, as matter of fact, little idea what those first Christians meant when they used resurrection language. Here's my problem. It's not a problem with the idea that a person who is dead can be alive again. For me, at least, that's not the problem. The problem is figuring out what it means to be alive in the first place. Both what I mean when talking about life and coming to an understanding of what Jesus or his disciples, as first century people, would mean by life. After we've tackled that, we can have some kind of foundation for understanding just what it is that God's about when he overcomes death. Without an understanding of life, I cannot speak with clarity and conviction about the overcoming of death by it.

I'm a little too close to being alive, most of the time, to find defining it easy. OK? The contrast between life and death is hard to articulate from our side of the barrier – I'm, well, it's hard to go there. I've accompanied people to the boundary between life and death, and said goodbye, but I've not been over the boundary, and so that contrast is not available to me. I don't have the advantage of having experienced death to enable a conversation about the contrast between life and death. I may guess. I may react out of my own feelings or write poetry, or music. But statements of experientially based knowledge are not legitimately available to me.

Now, a foot note. A secondary issue. The same problem applies when I think about the other difficult aspect of resurrection: it's supposed to be bodily. I, in general, stick fairly close to my body. Experience without it is not something with which I'm familiar. There are people who claim to be, but so far, those I've met have displayed personal and intellectual peculiarities which make me skeptical about their astral projection, out of body experiences and things like that. It's not that I think such things can't happen. Maybe they can. But my assurance by means of reliable witness, to this point, leaves something to be desired.

So this is the problem: How to ascribe some kind of significant meaning to resurrection in our contemporary world and not completely lose touch with what the early Christians were trying to communicate by the language. Like other important problems, I'd probably be able to answer it if I'd only stand up to preach and occupy a pulpit. Nothing adds to an assurance of truth like

being able to look down on people. But preaching from a raised pulpit isn't practical in a basement with a low ceiling. The last time I preached from a raised pulpit most of the sermon was spent silently wondering, "What am I doing up above all these people?" So I can't answer the question, but, as is appropriate for a batch of Episcopalians, I can make some suggestions. Episcopalians tend to do much better with suggestions than with orders. And may they be blessed for that.

My first suggestion is to begin thinking about resurrection not in relation to biology, but to God. It may have biological implications, but that's starting at the end, not the beginning. Primarily, resurrection is about God. The message is that if God is loving then, because of his infinite faithfulness, God never gives up on what he loves. Resurrection is the form under which the early church discusses God's not giving up on us. That's my first suggestion, that resurrection is a way of talking about God's not surrendering that which he loves to oblivion.

Since what God loves of us is our whole selves, whatever we mean by body is part of that on which God does not give up. Now God's idea of the nature of my physicality may be quite different from my own. But the point is that resurrection is exactly what we should expect. It is to be expected, dare I say it, almost to the point of triviality, from a truly loving God. The problem with accepting resurrection is not this business about dead bodies getting up and walking. The problem is: "Do we believe that God loves us?" If he does, and is God, then resurrection becomes almost trivially obvious and to be expected.

That's the first and the main thing. The second is a footnote to it. Of course, to be loved in this way ought to provoke in us a response of caring for ourselves and each other, but caring in a particular way. When we are resurrected, we are resurrected bodily, whatever that means, but, more centrally, we are resurrected as whole persons. It's not just the good stuff **that** gets saved. It's Jon Goman **who** gets saved.

So beware of thinking of your spiritual life as if it were like the process of making Swiss Cheese; as if the object were to create a significant number of holes in ourselves, the holes where we have discarded stuff we think God doesn't like. Then we offer to God what we think God would like. The result is not the offering of a holy self, but of a self full of holes. That is, I think, the opposite of the proper process. Our job is to make sure that whatever God may not like within us is precisely what he has a chance to work with. So slightly tongue in cheek, but with serious intent, the best offering to God is an awareness of our inadequacies. I mean, by the way, an honest, not a groveling one.

God is a redeemer. The whole Christian tradition keeps on saying it, and we keep on having trouble hearing it. But that's what God is interested in. Not control, but redemption. Not power, but salvation. Not achievement, but love.

And resurrection is a pledge that there is nothing about me which cannot be turned toward being. Nothing at all. To use the contemporary jargon, in a way which can, I hope, be taken in a larger sense than the contemporary jargon is usually taken, there is nothing in us which cannot be reframed to glory. It's not a matter of saving some parts of ourselves and discarding others. Salvation is not a sorting of parts, but a transformation of wholes. Resurrection is a

transformation of the experience of death into the experience of life. That way it becomes the sign, symbol and reality of the final triumph of God. That which is most inimical to being, becomes, in resurrection, a way of expressing the depth of being.

And that's why we talk about resurrection as God's triumph. It's not that he reanimates dead bodies, and creates affectionate, loving zombies. That's all a parody of what it's really about. As close as I can get to it is this: in offering ourselves to God we do not have to discard even our deaths as contrary to him. Even our deaths can be offerings to God which, by his love and mercy are transformed into life.

OK. That's all I've got to say about that. Let's stand for the creed.