

RISE AND SHINE
Acts 3:11-21 / 1 John 2:28-3:3

I don't know about you, but Session's decision that the time has come to reopen the church felt like "resurrection" to me. Yes, if you missed the announcement in the *Chapel Bell* for some reason, you heard correctly: We will resume in-person worship at *Ladue Chapel* beginning on May 2nd. After a long and often excruciating period of anxious waiting, hoping, fear, longing, isolation, and trauma, we are ready to inch our way back to some semblance of life as we used to know it. However, precisely because of what just happened—because of the trauma of the Easter story and because of the trauma in these pandemic times—getting back to life as we used to know it is neither possible nor is it desirable.

If you don't believe me, take it from Jesus's disciples, from Peter and John. "The time when we acted without knowing is over," they tell the crowd assembled at Solomon's Portico, "so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets."

I recently read a theologian who wrote, “The resurrected body of Christ is at once a new reality and a restoration of what life was like before it was so brutally undone.” With all due respect to this esteemed colleague, I could not disagree more. Yes, Christ’s resurrection ushers in a new reality for us. But if it only restores life like it was before it was brutally undone, there will have been no transformation of our trauma and Christ will have died and risen in vain. If “resurrection” simply means going back to the same-old same-old, what will we have gained in the crucible of the crucifixion, a terrifying day in the tomb, and finally God’s triumph in Jesus’s rising from the grave in victory over sin, death, and all that is unholy in this world?

Do we really want to go back to all the rancorous divisions before Covid? The divisions in our society, in our churches, in our own families? Do we really want to go back to a way of life that ravages our planet and its God-given resources? To crushing poverty? To mass shootings? To the threat of nuclear holocaust? Reading the daily headlines, it seems like that’s exactly the kind of life some may want to return to.

But Peter and John are stubborn in reminding us that we can choose another path. “Beloved, we are children of God now. What we will be has

not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: When he, Jesus, is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.”

The restoration of all things God has ever created and will continue to create is not a new idea which was ushered in through Christ’s resurrection. It is the narrative arc that spans all of Scripture. God’s people have always been promised a return to where they belong and have been assured of the restoration of health and wholeness for all creation. From Isaiah’s grand vision of God’s holy mountain where the lion and the lamb will lie together and destruction will be no more, to Paul’s assertion that all creation groans as it awaits its final redemption, to St. John’s vision of the new Jerusalem descending on the clouds and God’s dwelling once again in our midst: God’s project for the entire cosmos has been grand from start to finish. This vision begins in the Garden of Eden. It is interrupted in the Garden of Gethsemane with Jesus’s betrayal and arrest. It continues in a garden where the women find Christ’s tomb empty and misidentify Jesus as the gardener of the cemetery. And it ends in the heavenly Jerusalem, in a garden whose river flows through the city and the leaves of the trees planted alongside are for the healing of all nations. God is already doing a

new thing and Christ's resurrection points the way for us. The question is:

Do we perceive it?

As I was trying to wrap my mind around all of this, I thought about something my friend David Brinker, Director of the *Museum of Contemporary Religious Art* here in St. Louis (MOCRA, for short), said about the restoration of art. A few years ago, MOCRA acquired a powerful piece by Michael Tracy, entitled "Cruz to Bishop Oscar Romero, Martyr of El Salvador." Tracy created it in memory of bishop Romero who was met by an assassin's bullet as he was reading mass on March 24, 1980. The art work was in dire need of restoration which was painstakingly accomplished so as to not damage the piece. After removing layer after layer after layer of dust and dirt, the original as the artist intended began to take shape once again. And here is what David had to say about this project: "Our aim was not to get the piece the way it looked the day it left the artist's studio but to let its full power shine through."

I think this is what Christ's resurrection is about. It is a new reality which is very much unlike the old life he, and we, used to know. It is life transformed in a way which we can only glimpse every once in a while on this side of

the resurrection. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians, “Now we see in a mirror darkly, but then we shall see face to face,” and as John reminds us, “when Christ is revealed, we will be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” After the new reality of the resurrection peels away all the layers of our lives we have accumulated over time, we will get to see ourselves and all creation once again as God created all things in their intended beauty. So, I was perhaps a little hasty in my critique about my colleague’s assertion that through Christ’s resurrection, our old life has been restored. I would just rephrase it in a way my friend David Brinker might recognize. “Christ’s resurrection does not present us with a life the way it used to look like before he rose from the dead. But it honors our old life to let the full power of this new life shine through.”

I had my own moment, my own experience with this beautiful promise of the restoration of all things. A few years ago, my dog Sammy died and his death had a profound impact on me. Now, I am no stranger to dying and death but I was completely unprepared for how deeply this little creature’s demise affected me. One day, I wandered down the street where I used to take him for a walk and I remembered him as a little pup, full of curiosity and life, always getting into things he shouldn’t have gotten into. As I was

walking I began to sing a hymn that came to me from deep within. You know it because we just sang it at the beginning of our service today:

“Finish then Thy new creation / pure and spotless let us be / Let us see Thy great salvation / perfectly restored in Thee / Changed from glory into glory / 'til in heaven we take our place / 'til we cast our crowns before Thee / lost in wonder, love, and praise.”

I was lost that day, but as it turns out, I was lost in wonder, love, and praise. So rise, and let God’s full power of Christ’s resurrected life shine in and through you. For the universal restoration of all things has already begun.

Rev. Dieter U. Heinzl, PhD
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