

Easter C: John 20:1-18
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Church of the Good Shepherd
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"Death is no longer a downer." *USA Today* announced some years ago. "Death's former finality has been upstaged by a new vision of the afterlife in which the dearly departed can communicate with their loved ones, influence events, even come back to the mortal world for another go-round." The paper went on to describe various ways Americans have sought to take the finality of death and make it into something that is not so... *final*.

As ridiculous as that may sound, it makes some sense. I mean, we've always liked stories that end with everyone living "happily ever after." In today's pop culture, however, the "ever after" has been extended considerably. One of the most popular TV shows from a few years ago, "Buffy the Vampire Slayer", features Buffy and her boyfriend, Angel, a vampire who just won't die. Then there was "Weekend at Bernie's" and more recently "Swiss Army Man," movies about a man's body that ends up having a whole new life of adventure *after he dies*. In "What Dreams May Come", the movie we watched together a few months ago, Robin Williams is killed in a car crash but is incredibly reunited with wife, kids, and the family dog in an afterlife that looks remarkably like a German Romantic landscape. "The message is that love can survive death, that our morality doesn't doom us," says scriptwriter Ron Bass.

In recent years, we've seen a more technological twist on this theme, as the cheating of death is sought by transferring one's consciousness into a computer or even a new body. That is the premise of blockbuster films such as *Avatar* and *The Matrix*, of not-so-big-name movies like *CHAPPIE* and *Self/less*, and in shows like "Altered Carbon," "Upload" and "Black Mirror." But to find the most extreme example, we have to look at comic books, where recently one of Marvel's most popular superhero teams, the X-Men, has managed to pool their powers in such a way that they can reincarnate their teammates anytime they die, taking the joke that, in comic books death is only temporary, to a new height! At least before, you had to wait a few months for a popular hero or supervillain to reappear.

Gerald Celente, a trend researcher, has pointed out that the change in attitude towards death has emerged just as his generation, Baby Boomers, started watching their parents die, getting sick, and saying to themselves, "Wait a minute; a generation as wonderful as ours can't die, maybe we won't."

Such is "the grandiose narcissism and impertinence of boomers," James Swanson says. "They're determined that, for them, death will be different." Little wonder that, when Kevin Kline dared to die of cancer in *My Life as a House* and actually leave his son behind, the movie bombed at the box office. He may have spent the whole movie trying to heal broken relationships with his family, but he still died. Which is another way of saying he failed. Moviegoers couldn't accept that. The movie was honest about our mortality. But who goes to the movies to be reminded of that?

Some think this all started with the death of Princess Di and the inconceivability that such a beautiful life could be cut so short. She is Elton John's "candle in the wind" that goes on forever. See? We just go on, and on, immortal, like the film "Fluke" in which a workaholic father, killed in a car crash, comes back as his son's dog. Good grief!

Now, I don't mean to be picking on Boomers. I think it's safe to say that the attitude is pretty well ubiquitous now, no matter your generation. But the point I want to make about all this immortality glitz is that none of it has anything to do with Easter, any more than bunnies, plastic eggs, and candy have anything to do with Easter.

For, as the Gospel writers are at pains to portray, Jesus really died. He did not "appear to die." He did not "fall asleep" or "pass out from dehydration." He died, died a death more cruel and painful than can be imagined. He wasn't just "clinically dead" for a moment on the operating room table having an out-of-body experience; he was dead, sealed in the grave for three days. Jesus' disciples may not have had as much medical knowledge or technology as we do, but they knew death, knew what it looked like. In fact, they saw death far more often than we do. So they weren't deceiving themselves about his death. Nor did they console themselves with the notion that, though Jesus was crucified, "he would live on in his teachings, like the plays of Shakespeare or the music of Beethoven," or that his "immortal soul," his "divine spark" will endure forever, or that his wisdom and truth will live on in the hearts and minds of those who follow his great example, or any such drivel. Those are pagan, Greek ideas that have oozed over into our culture, but they're not in the Bible. Jesus, the one whom they loved, in whom they had hoped, died.

I mean, didn't you catch how Mary, Peter and the other disciple approached the first Easter? They came in great grief. They came to Jesus' tomb with no cheap, false consolation that "his message will never die." When they saw that the tomb was empty, they didn't think, "Oh, Jesus is immortal"; they thought, "Somebody took his body"! No different than, if you or I went to the grave of a loved one, only to discover the headstone cracked in two and mounds of freshly dug dirt all around, we wouldn't bother to hop into the hole to see if the casket was still there. We'd naturally assume someone has robbed the grave and we'd go to get some help.

Jesus was dead and the disciples had no expectation other than that he'd stay dead, like every other dead person. Naturally, then there was a lot of weeping, of real grief in John's account. Tears are the appropriate response to the reality, the finality, the totality of death.

Yet, within a few days, Jesus' followers realized what had happened to Jesus, that it wasn't that Jesus' body had been taken, but that he was in fact alive again, that it was God, not a graverobber who was behind the empty tomb. This would have never occurred to the disciples on their own; they had no expectation of this. Again, they knew, as well as we do, that dead people don't just get up walk away.

Still, it wasn't as if there weren't any signs, any clues, about what was going to happen to Jesus. The disciples, with the rest of Israel, believed that *one day* God was going to solve the problem of Israel's suffering and oppression, and, while God was at it, He would solve the problem of evil and injustice in the world too. The Scriptures promised such a day of divine victory. On Easter, the disciples discovered that day had come, come in the resurrection of Jesus. The cross, which

they had thought was the end, the death of their relationship with Jesus, was really just the beginning. Easter was God's answer, not just to the problem of What to do about the dead Jesus?, but more broadly, What shall be done about death—and evil and injustice in the world?

Easter is God's answer to this big cosmic question, given in form of Jesus raised from the dead. And I don't mean that poetically, as a metaphor. No, we are talking about God taking Jesus' dead body and raising it up, giving him new life. Notice how John goes to some length to show that Jesus' resurrection, while unexpected and strange, *really* happened, giving us plenty of details about that Easter morning to ground us in the here and now. While it was "still dark," John says, Mary went to the tomb. The "heavy stone" covering the tomb had been moved, and the "linen cloth" that covered Jesus' body is rolled carefully. Mary cries. A man appears; she thinks him to be the gardener. We are on firm and familiar ground here. This is the world we know, the world where people weep, and are confused, and things end in tragedy. It was within this real world, *our* world, that the resurrection happened.

And yet it wasn't of this world. Unlike something like spring which occurs every year, this was something perfectly new in the history of the universe. God had defeated death. The door that had always held has for the first time been forced open.

So we Christians have no problem affirming, as they say, "When you're dead, you're dead." But we also believe that, in the resurrection of Christ, God has acted decisively, conquered death. And so, death is real, but it is no longer final. It is no longer the end. The end is life.

What this means is that the resurrection isn't just proof of "life after death." There *is* life after death, to be sure, and God's people can expect it. But the point is that it won't be what Hollywood thinks about as "life after death." Christians don't believe in the immortality of a disembodied soul or that we can transfer our minds into computers. We believe, as we say in the Creed, in "the resurrection of the body," not the resuscitation of the body, but its raising, never to die again.

This is important. Easter wasn't God saying, "Let me get you out of this terrible, deadly, tearful world." Easter was God saying, "Let me show you what I am doing to you and your world."

Because of Easter, there is not only "life after death" for all God's people, but that God's people, those baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection, as Adilee has been this morning, that we will be given new bodies like Jesus' body to share in the new Heaven and the new Earth that God will make.

You see, we're not bound for some disembodied spiritual never-never-land, a bunch of winged angels playing harps among some fluffy clouds—"heaven." Earth is always and forever our home. So, our hope is not that we might someday leave our bodies behind but rather that that our bodies will be transformed, made fit for what God has in store for the world. Our bodies, for all their limitation and flaws, their susceptibility to disease and to breaking down, are nevertheless good, worthy of redemption, along with the rest of us. The resurrection then gives us a clue what it will be like when we too are resurrected, when God "does Easter" in full for us and the whole of creation.

So, it's not just that there's a cushy afterlife in store for some of us who make the grade, someday. If that was what we believed, then Christianity could be justly accused of being a pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die religion, rather than the thy-kingdom-come-on-earth-as-in-heaven religion that it is. If Easter is just about Jesus exiting the tomb in some figurative spiritual sense, leaving a body in the tomb to rot, leaving the world to stew in its own juice, then what hope is there for us? Better go make some movies that portray death as being only apparent, and spirits taking off for the pastel skies.

Easter is then not optional equipment for us Christians. It is essential. Without Easter, without the resurrection, Karl Marx would be right to say that "Christianity is a wish-fulfilling religion." Take away the resurrection and Friedrich Neitzche was probably right to say that "Christianity is a religion for wimps." But put it back in and you have a religion that will change the world.

It's telling when a man like Alan Watts, a popular Zen Buddhist author, admonishes us Christians for being too reticent in our proclamation, too restrained. He said, "If I were a Christian and believed my savior had been raised from the dead, I would shout it from the rooftop, and I would not be silent on the subject." Indeed, we *should* shout it from the rooftops.

For Easter is better than Hollywood's fantasies. In Hollywood, when people die, afterwards everything tends to get fuzzy, vaporous, and pink, and they drift off to be alone in some empty clouded sky. In Easter, God has raised Jesus from the dead and inaugurated heaven-come-to-earth. Movies could never convey the immensity of that reality, they could never do justice to marvellousness of Easter.

Fortunately, we don't need Hollywood in order to tell this story. This story is the message that we proclaim, that we celebrate, rehearse, confess, and sing every time we come together at Good Shepherd. God has raised Jesus from the dead, never to die again, and because he lives, we have a glimpse of what God has in store for us and for the rest of creation. So then let us shout it from the rooftops: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!