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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X13
Easter Sunday (Year A) 8:30 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 16 April 2017

Acts 10:34-43
Ps 118:1-2, 14-24
Colossians 3:1-4
Matthew 28:1-10

The Gift of Resurrection

"[Y]our life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed in glory" (Col. 3).

Alleluia. Christ is risen!

The former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams once wrote that the basic fact of Christianity is judgment. What if instead, at its heart, it is a gift?¹ This year to test this hypothesis the Cathedral chose "the Gift" as our theme.

The vast majority of our life happens in the secular world where who we are is determined by money, by what we have to exchange with others. But we also have an innate sense that we are more than our net worth. You are more than a consumer, or a provider for your family, or a worker. You are more than your job or what you accomplish in your career. You are more than what you make or buy.

A gift is something we cannot get through our own efforts. We cannot buy it or exchange it or acquire it through an act of will.² Our life is a gift that we can never fully understand. Love and transcendence are gifts too. When we lose our faith, resurrection is the restoration of the power of the gift of life and love in the face of our fear.

The great novelist Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) writes that, "The artist appeals to that part of our being... which is a gift and not an acquisition – and, therefore, more permanently enduring."³ This morning God also speaks to this part of us. Let me share three words about the gift of resurrection.

1. The great Romantic poet John Keats (1795-1821) saw plenty of suffering before he died of tuberculosis at age 25. Still he writes that the world is not so much a "vale of tears" as a "vale of soul-making."⁴ My first word for today is darkness because darkness and tears are part of that soul-making.

When Mary Magdalene and the other Mary come to the tomb they arrive at dawn and they have lost everything.⁵ They feel utterly distraught, afraid and hopeless. But they still are there. They have not run away from the suffering. They are true and faithful, loyal to their duty.

Being a priest for me has sometimes seemed like being constantly summoned into the darkness. I served for fourteen years as a priest in a relatively small town. When I first arrived no place had any particular meaning. When I departed I left behind a whole geography of tragedies.

Across from the fire station was the house where I visited my friend Jennifer, a forty-year-old professional opera singer. I saw her every week of the last year of her life before she died of Lou Gehrig's disease. At the café in town a man told me that he was

losing a job he loved. I was with dozens of families to say goodbye for the last time to loved ones at the VA Hospital. In every corner of town there were the houses and apartments where families talked to me about recent diagnoses of terminal diseases.

There is the freeway hotel where my friend began her affair. It was there that a teenager who I'd known since she was in elementary school overdosed. There was the central park where another friend told me about his affair and the regional park where a gentle quiet man I knew, suffering from depression and despair, had unsuccessfully tried to take his own life. On my last day at my office I could still see the faces of a family whose son had succumbed to his struggle with PTSD.

Every place I go in that town is so full of ghosts and so full of stories. There were indeed moments when God seemed far away. But the strangest thing to me is there are so many more times when we were gathered around a hospital bed, in the church, at a chance encounter on Main Street or at a funeral planning meeting when God felt tangibly present. Like the two Mary's Jesus has surprised me in the dark places of my life.

2. My second word is hiddenness. During World War II German spies in Latin America would photographically shrink a page of text down to a dot less than one millimeter in diameter. They would then hide this microdot on a period in an otherwise ordinary letter. The FBI spotted the first of these microdots in 1941 after being tipped off to look for a something shiny like film on a note.⁶

Sometimes being a Christian in today's secular society feels like this. Each of us might look like just another dot on the page but we carry a much greater message of hope than is initially be obvious.

The Apostle Paul writes, "your life is hidden in Christ" (Col. 3). He uses the Greek word *krupto* which means to hide and is related to our words cryptography and encryption. The gift of resurrection is not something that we see. It happens invisibly. In the beginning of all the resurrection accounts Jesus is hidden from the friends who seek him. Indeed often our connection with God is hidden from those around us and sometimes even we have a hard time seeing it.

The Greek language has two words for life. The word *bios* (like biology) is limited life. It is a particular individual example of life. It is life that dies. On the other hand, *zoē* is life that endures as, "a thread that runs through all bios-life and is not broken when a particular [being] perishes."⁷

The life you have in Christ is *zoē*. It connects you to what is eternal and runs through all of creation. You may not always be able to see it but it is there whenever you need it. In all of time there has never been anyone quite like you. Everywhere you go you bring a connection to the source of life that is always making the world new.

3. My last word is joy. When the two Mary's go to the tomb an angel like lightning appears out of heaven shaking the world. The tomb's guards quake with fear until they became like dead men. In the midst of the strangeness of the angel sitting on the stone, the shock and fear, the women are overcome with "great joy." They are literally

running to tell the disciples when suddenly Jesus meets everyone and says, “rejoice.” When you are with Jesus you are already where you are going to.

The rejoicing that began then is still going on, echoing through the centuries to this very moment. As the sun streams through these beautiful windows and we break bread, as the Men and Boy’s choir draws us as close to heaven as is possible on this earth – Jesus is present right here with us.

There have been dark times and places when the lamp of faith seemed to be burning out. Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin (1888-1938) first became famous as one of the Russian Communist leaders of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. An intellectual and the editor of the Soviet newspaper Pravda, there is an apocryphal story that in 1930 he delivered a lecture to a huge crowd on the subject of atheism.

His talk lasted an hour. Full of insults and philosophical arguments, he concluded saying, “Therefore there is no God; Jesus Christ never existed, there is no such thing as the Holy Spirit... The future belongs to the State; and the State is in the hands of the Party. Are there any questions?”

He looked out to a silent crowd whose faith seemed absolutely refuted. An old priest raised his hand, came up on stage next to the communist leader. He looked slowly at the audience from one side of the auditorium to the other. Then in a quiet voice he said, “Christos voskres! Christ is Risen!”

As one the whole crowd stood up and shouted. “Alleluia. The Lord is risen indeed!”⁸

Perhaps Rowan Williams is right about Christianity and judgment. But I don’t think he is. For me the gift of resurrection is not about something that happened long ago. It is a whole way of praying, living and serving others today. I feel the presence of Jesus in all my experiences of joy – at my daughter’s sixteenth birthday celebration, even on those sparkling spring days riding bike through the city or catching waves at Ocean Beach.

Karl Barth says that at the heart of Easter is the disciples’ experience and our own. “[W]hen they lost [Jesus] through death they were sought and found by him as the resurrected [one].”⁹ Jesus finds us in our “soul-making” and in our darkness. Jesus finds us when the *zoē*, the life that connects us to the divine, has become invisible to us. Jesus finds us in the joy we feel together this morning.

Alleluia. Christ is Risen!

¹ I have Williams’ comment in notes I made fifteen years ago. I’m not sure what sermon or book this comes from.

² So much of my understanding of this topic has been shaped by Lewis Hyde. This line comes from Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Poetry* (NY: Vintage, 1979) xi.

³ Cited on *Ibid.*, xi.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁵ The Greek word *epiphoskousē* means “to dawn” and is literally to “shine upon.”

⁶ Simon Singh, *The Code: The Science of Secrecy from Ancient Egypt to Quantum Cryptography* (NY: Anchor Books, 1999) 7.

⁷ Hyde, 32.

⁸ Jeremy Clark-King told me this story and found the following material on the Internet. Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin was a Russian Communist leader who took part in the Bolshevik Revolution 1917, was editor of the Soviet newspaper Pravda (which by the way means truth), and was a full member of the Politburo. His works on economics and political science are still read today.

There is a story told about a journey he took from Moscow to Kiev in 1930 to address a huge assembly on the subject of atheism. Addressing the crowd he aimed his heavy artillery at Christianity hurling insults, argument, and proof against it. An hour later he was finished. He looked out at what seemed to be the smoldering ashes of the crowd's faith. "Are there any questions?" Bukharin demanded. Deafening silence filled the auditorium but then one old priest approached the platform and mounted the lectern standing near the communist leader. He surveyed the crowd first to the left then to the right. Finally he shouted the ancient greeting known well in the Russian Orthodox Church: *Христос воскрес!* *Christos voskres!* Christ is Risen

En masse the crowd arose as one and the response came crashing like the sound of thunder: *Воистину воскрес!* *Voistinu voskres!* He is Risen Indeed!

It has also been set in other places:

During the time of the Cold War a local political official in one of the Slavic nations oppressed by communism decided to have a town meeting....

and

"I am reminded of a story from 1918 in Russia, when the new Communist commissars were fanning across the countryside preaching the gospel of Marx with evangelistic zeal to peasants who had been...

From Charles Rush in 2007

Lesslie Newgin quoted it as a "well-known story" in 1968

and N. T. Wright "Following Jesus":

"The communist lecturer paused before summing up. His large audience listened fearfully. 'Therefore,' he said, 'there is no God; Jesus Christ never existed' there is no such thing as a Holy Spirit. The Church is an oppressive institution, and anyways it's out of date. The future belongs to the State; and the State is in the hands of the Party.'

He was about to sit down when an old priest near the front stood up. 'May I say two words?' he asked. (It's three in English, but he was of course speaking Russian.) The lecturer, disdainfully, gave him permission. He turned, looked out over the crowd, and shouted: 'Christ is risen!' Back came the roar of the people: 'He is risen indeed!' They'd been saying it every Easter for a thousand years; why should they stop now?"

⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Index with Aids for the Preacher* (NY: T&T Clark, 1977) 383.