

RESURREXIT SICUT DIXIT! ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA! HE IS RISEN AS HE SAID! ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA!

OK, your RISUS PASCHALIS – or Easter joke – an Easter tradition in the Catholic church because God played the biggest joke on the devil on that first Easter. The devil thought he had won on Good Friday. But Easter showed that the joke was on him.

An elderly man, thinking his wife was losing her hearing, went about 20 feet behind her and asked, “Can you hear me sweetheart?” No reply. He moved to 10 feet and inquired again. No reply. 5 feet and still not a word. A few inches behind her, he asked, ‘Can you hear me now honey?’ His wife said, ‘For the 4th time, yes!’

God never overpowers, never twists arms, never pushes us so as to take away our freedom. God respects us and never coerces us.

And nowhere is this more true than in what is revealed in the resurrection of Jesus. The Gospels assure us that, like His birth, the resurrection was physical, real, not just some alteration inside the consciousness of believers. After the resurrection, we are assured, Jesus’ tomb was empty, people could touch Him, He ate food with them; He was not a ghost.

But His rising from the dead was not a brute slap in the face to His critics, a non-negotiable fact that left skeptics with nothing to say. The resurrection didn’t make a big splash. It was not some spectacular event that exploded into the world as the highlight on the evening news. It had the same dynamics as the incarnation itself: After He rose from the dead, Jesus was seen by some, but not by others; understood by some, but not by others. Some got His meaning and it changed their lives, others were indifferent to Him, and still others understood what had happened, hardened their hearts against it, and tried to destroy its truth.

Notice how this parallels, almost perfectly what happened at the birth of Jesus: the baby was real, not a ghost, but He was seen by some, but not by others and the event was understood by some but not by others. Some got its meaning and it changed their lives, others were indifferent and their lives went on as before, while still others – like Herod – sensed its meaning but hardened their hearts against it and tried to destroy the child.

Why the difference? What makes some see the resurrection while others do not? What lets some understand the mystery and embrace it, while others are left in indifference or hatred?

Hugo of St. Victor used to say: Love is the eye! When we look at anything through the eyes of love, we see correctly, understand, and properly appropriate its mystery. The reverse is also true. When we look at anything through eyes that are jaded, cynical, jealous, or bitter, we will not see correctly, will not understand, and will not properly appropriate its mystery.

We see this in how the Gospel of John describes the events of Easter Sunday. Jesus has risen, but first of all, only the person who is driven by love, Mary Magdala, goes out in search of Him. The others remain as they are, locked inside their own worlds. But love seeks out its beloved and Mary Magdala goes out, spices in hand, wanting at least to embalm His dead body. She finds His grave empty and runs back to Peter and the beloved disciple and tells them the tomb is empty. The two race off together, towards the tomb, but the disciple whom Jesus loved outruns Peter and gets to the tomb first, but he doesn’t enter, he waits for Peter (the leader – the authority) to go in first.

Peter enters the empty tomb, sees the linens that had covered the body of Jesus, but does not understand. Then the beloved disciple, love, enters. He sees and he does understand. Love grasps the mystery. Love is the eye. It is what lets us see and understand the resurrection.

That is why, after the resurrection, some saw Jesus but others did not. Some understood the resurrection while others did not. Those with the eyes of love saw and understood. Those without the eyes of love either didn't see anything or were perplexed or upset by what they did see.

There are lots of ways to be blind. I remember my first Easter in Rome as a student, 47 years ago. Easter in Rome was generally beautiful, high spring weather – and I had walked over to the Spanish steps which were covered in the most magnificent gigantic pots of azaleas. But I was mostly blind to what was around me. I was young, terribly homesick, missing Easter with my family, and nursing a huge heartache. That colored everything I was seeing and feeling. It was Easter Sunday, in spring, in high sunshine, but for what I was seeing, it might as well have been midnight on Good Friday, in the dead of winter.

I was feeling terribly lonesome, and I had taken the walk to calm my restlessness. At the bottom of the steps, I saw a blind beggar holding a sign that read: “E primavera – e sono cecco” – “It's spring – and I'm blind!” The irony was not lost on me. I was blind that day, more blind than that beggar, seeing neither spring nor the resurrection. What I was seeing were only those things that reflected what was going on inside my own heart.

Christ is risen, though we might not see Him! We don't always notice spring. The miraculous doesn't force itself on us. It's there, there to be seen, but whether we see or not, and what precisely we do see, depends mainly upon what's going on inside our own hearts. (adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, posting of 23 March 2003)

A story of resurrection to conclude. I owe it to Fr. Scott McCue, who is pastor of St. Thomas More in Chapel Hill, a wonderful preacher and pastor, who has been a dear friend of mine since we served that parish together over 20 years ago.

Fr. Ed Foley writes: “Almost 30 years ago, I witnessed a tomb event. It was an experience I had through the eyes of my father who had served in the Navy during World War II. It was on the day we visited the national cemetery named the ARIZONA, in Pearl Harbor. As we were on the launch out to the memorial, I noticed Dad growing more and more agitated. When I inquired what was bothering him he could only say, “Why are all of them here?” The ‘them’ were Japanese tourists, so many it seemed we were the only non-Japanese in transit; furthermore, many were my father's age, in their 70's and 80's; men whom I imagined he might have fought against in the Pacific.

If you've been to the Arizona you know that there is not much to this small platform perched on the roof of a tomb: a few places to stand outside and peer through the water to the turrets of the ship below and a surprising small and simpler inner sanctum where the names of those who rest in the waters below are inscribed upon the wall.

Separating that wall from a row of benches were a few small waist-high crowd control poles linked one to the other with a red velvet rope. The three of us, my parents and I, were sitting in the front row staring at the wall of names as a steady drizzle fell. Then, unexpectedly, a touching ritual unfolded in that tomb as one elderly Japanese woman stepped forward, took the flowered lei from around her neck and laid it over one of the poles.....another woman followed.....and then another.....and another.

Within minutes the poles and connecting ropes were weighted down in an explosion of beautiful orchids. Dad was crying; not wanting to intrude, I looked straight ahead, unprepared for what would happen next. Suddenly, Dad stood up, whispered something to my mother, who removed the lei she was wearing around her neck and he stepped into the flow of Asian women whom he towered over, making his way towards the front and placed the delicate flowers on this makeshift shrine.

As he returned to his seat, head bowed, I was aware that these Japanese women, this ancient enemy had entered into his holy of holies and taught him of reverence; they had entered this tomb and offered glimpses of resurrection under the guise of reconciliation.

But the teaching was not quite over – for in a final ritual inversion, when the flower procession had come to an end and silence embraced us all, one lone elderly Japanese man, stood, walked deliberately toward the same post Dad had approached, removed the ring of orchids from around his neck and placed them carefully on top of those my dad had worn. Then he turned, facing my father seated before him – and without ceremony or flourish bowed to the honored gentleman who gave me life, and then returned to his seat.

I became aware that this tomb, at least for a moment, had been emptied of old prejudices and long enmities – and was momentarily filled with transformation, even resurrection. So may it be for you and for me. (adapted from Edward Foley: PREACHING ACROSS GENERATIONS: A STRATEGIC CONSIDERATION OF AGE COHORTS IN HOMILETIC MINISTRY: CHICAGO STUDIES, Vol 53:3, Winter, 2014)

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