

## RESURRECTION . . . READY OR NOT

Easter 2011

*Matthew 28:1-10*

What a wonderful, joyful, celebration  
of resurrection life we've been having today.  
It started at the stroke of midnight this morning,  
when those of here waiting in Vigil last night,  
were filled with joy and wonder  
as the season of Lent gave way to the season of Easter,  
as the darkness in this room was transformed to light,  
and the shadows suddenly filled with bright color,  
and the high songs of praise began.

The Lenten season for quiet penitence and suppressing alleluias is *over*,  
Today we sing "Alleluia" with utter abandon.  
A few years ago on Easter Sunday, I counted, ahead of time,  
the number of times we would sing or say the word "Alleluia"  
including the great Hallelujah Chorus we end with.  
It was 98—just two short of a hundred Alleluias!  
So in my sermon I had us all say two more alleluias,  
in unison, just so we could hit 100.

*This year?* No worries!  
We're *already* over the top.  
Even *before* the Hallelujah Chorus,  
we will have said or sung 139 Alleluias.  
If you want to count the Hallelujah Chorus, be my guest!

Friends in Christ, the season of fasting is now over.  
It's time for feasting!  
And time for drinking freshly home-roasted coffee again.  
I don't think I ever enjoyed my morning ritual  
of hand-grinding and French-press-brewing  
a perfect cup of coffee  
as I did this morning, after 40 days *without* it.  
I was so ready for that cup of coffee.

After 40 days of your *own* Lenten fast,

whatever form it may have taken,  
you are probably, along with me, so ready for Easter.

After a long, cold, wet, on-and-off-again winter,  
we are *all* so ready for spring and sunshine and gardening.

A number of you have lost loved ones in recent days or weeks.  
Or are facing irreversible illness,  
or other life-draining experiences of suffering and loss.  
In your journeys of grief, and of physical or spiritual suffering,  
you are, no doubt, so ready for an Easter-like transformation.

No matter *what* the source or degree of emptiness—  
from the minor self-imposed fasts that some of us undertook,  
to the deepest of loss and grief that some of you had thrust upon you,  
we are ready to see the fasting end and the feasting begin.

We are *so-o-o-o-o* ready for resurrection!

But are we *really*?  
Are we *really* ready for Easter?  
I mean, do we *really* want to know what's coming next,  
now that the tomb has been burst open?  
Do we *really* want to be a part of it?  
We'd better think twice.  
If Easter was only about celebrating life,  
lifting our spirits in joy, and singing alleluia,  
then of *course* we're ready . . .  
In this wounded world,  
we're *always* ready for something that brings joy.

But if Easter means what I *think* it means—  
we'd better think again.  
If Easter means opening up a whole new horizon in life,  
If Easter means throwing open the gates to a world  
where God is turning everything on its head,  
If Easter means letting go of a world  
where we are familiar with the terrain,  
where we know the contours—

Then maybe we better *think twice*  
before we claim to be ready for Easter.

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Julia Esquivel, a Guatemalan woman who was both poet and theologian,  
wrote a poem entitled, “Threatened with Resurrection.”  
The poem inspired Parker Palmer to write about his *own* hesitation  
to fully embrace resurrection.

Palmer recognized something in himself.  
Maybe *we* can identify.  
Sometimes, he wrote, he fears life itself,  
he fears the movement toward new life,  
more than he fears death in its various forms.

To illustrate, he told a joke from a Woody Allen movie,  
where a man went to see a psychiatrist,  
and complained that his brother-in-law, who lived with them,  
thought he was a chicken.  
He said, “My brother-in-law cackles, he pecks at the rug,  
he builds nests in the corners.”  
Psychiatrist said, “Bring him in, I think I can cure him.”  
The man says, “Oh, no, Doc. We don’t *want* that.  
We need the eggs.”

*Sometimes*, Palmer commented, our little pathologies, our illusions,  
are actually useful to us in some way, so we cling to them.  
We need the eggs.

He also referenced another story,  
an ancient tale about the apostle Peter.  
Legend has it that Peter walked up to a blind beggar,  
crouched in the dust by the city gate.  
Peter put his hands over the blind man’s eyes, and said,  
“In the name of the resurrected Christ, may your sight be restored!”  
Immediately the healed blind man jumped up, eyes wide open,  
his face full of anger, and screamed at Peter,  
“You fool! You have destroyed my way of making a living!”  
Whereupon he gouged out his own eyes, and collapsed into the dust.

That legend may be hard to believe,  
but the kernel of truth it reveals about *us*,  
might ring true, even if we don’t *want* to believe it.  
We may suffer from blindness,  
but at least we know how to “make a living” from it.  
The idea of doing away with our blindness,  
and seeing more fully and completely,  
can be threatening to life as we know it.

Jesus’ resurrection puts us to the test.  
It tests our willingness to move into new territory,  
to live a larger life than the one we are so familiar with.  
Our blindness is no fun, of course.  
Illusions are not something we aspire to.  
But at least we’ve gotten familiar with them.  
We know what to expect.  
Resurrection forces us out of our comfortable home turf,  
and onto a whole new terrain.

You know, all the Gospel stories about Jesus’ resurrection,  
tell about the fear of those who witnessed it.

In today’s Easter story from Matthew 28,  
not only did the Roman guards faint dead away,  
the two Marys who came to the tomb were also struck with fear.  
The angel had to comfort them, I suppose, to keep *them* from fainting.  
“Do not be afraid;  
I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.  
He is not here; for he has been raised.”  
Then the angel gave them *more* news,  
and instructed them to tell the rest of the disciples  
that Jesus was going ahead of them to Galilee,  
and would soon make an appearance to them.

So what did they *do*?  
They “left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy.”  
With fear and great joy.  
Yes, you can be afraid and joyful at the same time.

If *anything* can do that to you, resurrection can.  
Then Jesus himself met them on their way.  
And upon his greeting,  
they fell to the ground, taking hold of him,  
and Jesus, like the angel, said to them,  
“Do not be afraid . . . do not be afraid.”

In Jesus’ presence they were again, no doubt,  
filled with fear and great joy.

*Joy* . . . because they knew that there was *something*  
inherently good and marvelous and life-affirming  
about seeing Jesus standing there in front of them.

But *fear* . . . because they could only glimpse how much  
their lives were about to turn upside down,  
and take them places they knew nothing about.

In his book, Parker Palmer asked, (and I quote)

“If I lived as if resurrection were real,  
and allowed myself to die for the sake of new life,  
what might I be called upon to *do*?

What strange and difficult tasks might be laid upon me?  
What comforts taken away?  
How might my life be changed?”

*Believing* the resurrection is only the beginning.  
God invites us to live a resurrection life.

In the Easter story in John 20,  
it tells how Peter and John went to see the empty tomb . . .  
and believed.

They *believed*. And then they turned around and went back home.  
Looking, I imagine, for some semblance of normal.

I wonder whether *we* are ready to do *more*.

The Risen Lord Jesus Christ,  
asks us to lay down our own agenda,  
and take the risk of walking into new life.

And along with that invitation, Christ makes a promise:  
I will walk with you.

I will never leave or forsake you.

You can trust me.

This invitation to a resurrection life,  
is not only for us *personally*, as individual Easter disciples.  
The *church* is invited to be an Easter community.  
As a church we are called to live a kind of life  
that often stands in stark contrast to the world around us,  
that refuses to define life on the world’s terms.  
That’s not easy to do.

The culture around us is in the business of peddling illusions.

Telling us we “need the eggs.”

Trying to sell us all manner of little “deaths,”  
claiming they are life.

Easter turns the world’s notion of life upside down.

It threatens the egg business.

It threatens our blindness.

Resurrection life is a threat to life as we know it.

It’s a threat we are called to walk toward, to embrace.

But what a joyful, exhilarating, *thrilling* threat that *is*.

Julia Esquivel, the Guatemalan who wrote the poem

“Threatened by Resurrection,” described resurrection this way:

“There is something here within us

Which doesn’t let us sleep, which doesn’t let us rest,

Which doesn’t stop pounding deep inside.”

If the thought of being resurrection people,  
can keep us awake at night, heart pounding,  
we might on the right track.

May God give us courage.

May God give us grace.

Alleluia! Alleluia!

—Phil Kniss, April 23, 2011