

## “Easter Resurrection: The Unnatural Power of God”<sup>1</sup>

### I

Someone’s said, “The power of God is now and has always been the power to raise us from the dead. Period. It’s not about us. It’s about God.” So they said, “your only role is to stick your feet straight up in the air ... and admit that without God you might as well be put to bed with a shovel.”

The power of Resurrection is about the power of God.

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But now ... I know. I know. We live in the days of skepticism. Doubt. Rationalism. “Scientism” – you know, if you can’t measure it, it ain’t real! If there’s not a rational explanation – it ain’t real! You know, the old science versus theology thing – which, by the way – is, in the last analysis, a myth. ‘Cause it turns out that many – if not most – of the best scientists, in my opinion – recognize the limits of measurement, recognize the borders beyond which lie Mystery. And I speak as someone trained in science.

But anyway, I don’t want to get into all that all right now ‘cause it takes us too far afield this morning. And that’s not why we’re here. We’re here to celebrate Easter. But still ... what is it that we’re celebrating? This side ... and the other side ... of Mystery?

Well, let’s turn to the Gospels and ask.

### II

OK. Now the Gospels are pretty unclear about just what did happen during that Saturday night in question. The Resurrection event did begin in the dark. All the Gospels pretty much say that. The stone had been rolled aside, they pretty much all agree. But then it all gets kind of hazy. I mean, in or near the tomb, Luke says there were two white robed figures. Or Mark here says maybe just one. Mark says there were only these women who came that morning ... But another version says Peter also came to the tomb too with some other disciple. You just kind of get a sense of quiet chaos and confusion.

I mean, there were no eyewitnesses ... and apparently the Gospel writers didn’t collude to tidy up their sense of what happened that night. But if you close your eyes, I think you can almost hear the sound of running feet, of shouts. ... Confusion all around.

Matthew speaks of “fear and great joy.” Mark here speaks of “terror.” Well of course who wouldn’t be terrified! It’s just plain unnatural to expect a sealed tomb and then find one filled with angels. ... Just plain unnatural to look for a corpse and find the risen Lord.

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See, none of this is rational ... or natural. I mean, death is natural. Loss is natural. Grief is natural. But here ... on that first Easter morning ... death's stone being rolled away, that morning reveals the highly unnatural, irrational truth of the Resurrection ... disclosing the meaning shed on all future life.

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Now as I said at the start of this sermon, in recent years ... maybe as our culture drifts toward secularism, maybe our skeptical, post-modern blindness in the face of any truth beyond the visible ... at any rate, I think in recent years you hear a lot more at Easter about ... oh ... renewal, revival, rebirth ... a lot more than you hear about Resurrection. Oh, you hear about a new season, new growth. You hear about sap rising in the trees, the singing of birds, the warmth of the lengthening days ... a new season in the earth, a new season in the heart of humanity ... you know, that sort of thing.

But now seriously. Does this really grab you? I mean, is it really possible that pap like that would have grabbed hold of a tiny band of utterly demoralized, totally disgraced, frightened, scattered disciples – pap like that utterly transforming them in the process? One journalist who wrote a story about Easter described it as a “spring festival” celebrating “the ancient myths of the Mediterranean imagination.”

I mean, is that what turned the disciples inside out and upside down? Is the miracle of Easter simply this, that the disciples’ mythic imagination “came to understand” ... something? Let me just remind you here that the disciples were terrified in the first days following the crucifixion. Terrified that the same gruesome end would follow for them. So does it seem credible that something as simple as sitting around and remembering Jesus as a by-product of their “mythic imaginations” would change them from craven cowards to bold disciples?

Not credible to me. No. Something incontrovertible, something dramatic, something undeniable, something visible, was needed to transform them from fearful to fearless. To me, this is one of the strongest, rational – if you will – “proofs” for the Resurrection. I mean, doubtful fishermen simply sitting around talking about Jesus ... sharing their memories ... would not effect that kind of dramatic shift ... that shift that within a few years would be shaking the very foundations of the entire Roman Empire!

My point: Something actually, really happened in the darkness of that tomb in the middle of that night – something resisting all human understanding altogether ... altogether that transformed those followers from craven cowards to disciples willing, ready to die for their faith in the resurrected Christ.

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So. Is that maybe what Mark and the others are trying to tell you and me here? See, I believe that the first witnesses to Easter knew full well that something ... something earth-shattering ... had happened to them that dawn.

‘Cause see, they weren’t expecting Resurrection. No, there was nothing in their conscious minds that would have set them up to expect one body resurrected to new life. ‘Cause when they talked about the resurrection in their day, what they’d meant was the resurrection of their whole people at the end time.

Not a particular resurrected body to new life now. No, they hadn't looked for that. Hadn't expected that!

So what these women found ... what these disciples discovered was something completely unexpected, something stupendous, something beyond their wildest dreams. ... And it shook them to the core. Their world had been transformed ... penetrated by God's sheer mystery and power. And they would never be the same again.

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And so I stand before you this morning – as I have done before – and with all the faith I have in me, I tell you that I believe that somehow Jesus rose ... got up ... by God ... and came back to an altogether new life with glory all around Him and upon Him. And let me be clear. I am not speaking here metaphorically or poetically. I'm speaking here as plainly as I can. Jesus rose by God's power. What was dead was flooded with new life.

Now I wasn't there. ... So I didn't see it. But I affirm it – just as surely as I affirm that the sun rose this morning ... flooding the world with light. Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead on that first Easter morning.

And that event became the hinge of history.

### III

Now. So here's my question. If this is all so, what's the implication? What is the implication here?

Well, I think the implication is this: The resurrection of the body, Jesus' body first, your body and mine at the end of the story ... resurrection itself means that this world matters ... that the matter of this world matters.

See, if the Jesus story had ended on that Good Friday, then the disciples could simply be "the eleven." And after the appropriate rituals and a season for mourning, they could go back to life as it was. See, if the story ended on that Friday, then they can just be "the eleven," alumni of the Jesus' School for Religion, students of an inspiring, though finally tragic teacher. And so if the story ends on that Friday, you can just close out the book of Mark with a final Amen.

But if the news of that first Sunday is true, then Jesus' disciples can't just stay the eleven. No, now they have to become apostles, those sent, sent to Jerusalem, sent to Judea, sent to Samaria, sent to the ends of the earth. And there'll be arrests and shipwrecks and eruptions of the spirit ... and pain and stones and miles of weary road to walk.

See – if you take the Resurrection of the body seriously – first Jesus' and then yours and mine – which is more or less the point of today. ... If you take the Resurrection seriously – then I think you have a great weight laid on your shoulders ... and on mine. 'Cause if this morning you can sing, "Alleluia! Christ is risen," then you're saying that Jesus Christ really is Lord of all, and all the other gods of this world are

not! And if you sing, “Jesus Christ is risen today!” then I think you have to get ready to witness to that – the next time someone, by their hate, by their prejudice, by their cruelty ... someone witnesses that they think that death’s in charge – all those forms of death – indifference to suffering (I just don’t care), hatred of the other ... all those forms of death that would be endorsed by your silence.

Instead, you have to be ready to witness to the resurrection truth of love, of justice, of freedom ... of life over death.

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See, finally, if you believe the news of this Sunday, then the scary truth of Monday is that this story – your story – is just beginning. And then you’ll just head out these doors this morning and into the streets as Easter people ... sent with Good News into the streets of Church Hill, with Good News into the city of Richmond ... with Good News wherever your feet take you on your journey ... into whatever Galilee you go to on Monday morning.

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‘Cause that’s just where He is. And that’s just where He’ll meet you. And if you can remember that ... if you can remember that ... then there’s nothing you cannot do: Move mountains, love your enemies ... change the world.

‘Cause God is ahead of you ... every step of the way.

Happy Easter!

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<sup>1</sup> Resources used: Lectionary Homiletics for April/May 2015, “Resurrections”; Synthesis, “He is Risen”; Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Unnatural Truth” in *Home by Another Way*