



“RISE UP”
SCRIPTURE: EZEKIEL 37: 1-10; MATTHEW 28: 1-10
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017
The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

Fifty-eight years ago, April 16, a young couple just beginning their twenties and just shy of a year into their marriage, are caught up in the wonder and delight of their new baby daughter—just five days old: a beautiful baby by all accounts, and a joy beyond measure.

The young couple was living into a bright future—midway through seminary for the young man—following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather before him. And this new baby made the years stretch out ahead of them with even more promise.

The wonder and delight of new life—new possibilities, of love that captures our deepest affections and tells us who we are in ways we never knew possible. That was the spring of 1959—a taste of heaven to be sure.

Fifty-seven years ago, just a few days into the summer of 1960 that same couple in the midst of graduation from seminary and anticipating life’s next chapter entered into an experience of hell on earth. Their daughter, now a couple of months into her second year of life, was sick.

A vortex of moments—what seemed like a simple cold and a visit to the doctor, the next day became a hospitalization, and then after a few more days, a horrible diagnosis—leukemia, and just a few days later, she was gone.

That young couple was my parents. And that sorrow helped to form my three sisters and me as we came into the world.

I never knew my oldest sister—neither did any of my other 3 sisters, but she deeply shaped us.

It is from her that I learned to anticipate grief and to walk slowly in its wake.

It is from her that I learned life is not fair, and innocent people suffer and die.

It is from her that I learned about the depths of love someone can have for another—and how new life can fold out of even the worst possible death.

In many ways, my sister, Allison Truly Mount, was my first teacher of resurrection. It is her ghost that showed me that space, within each of us, that yearns for a way to trust the power of a love that never dies and a life that goes on forever.

This has not been a simple set of lessons in my life. I am guessing your own brushes with resurrection's mystery have not been simple either.

We Christians come to the joy, the elation of our Easter Sundays by the hardest of roads—the road that teaches us of harsh injustice, of a terrifying kind of suffering—the kind that feels like it could be the thief of any semblance of hope we have left, the kind that seems to mock God's promises of redemption, the kind that makes real joy seem like a stranger to us.

We cannot rise up to the vivid truth of Easter without abiding first in the shadows of the cruelty and injustice that this world seems to doll out with horrible consistency.

If someone asked you why you are a Christian, where would Resurrection come in to your answer? And what about joy? Where have you seen dry, brittle bones come to life? Where have you seen the Lord?

Resurrection has never been settled doctrine. Its mysterious power and truth have always taken a variety of forms and answered a range of life's hardest questions. And it has always been something that calls each person into a profound journey of discovery of inner resources we would not otherwise know we had.

Resurrection is not an idea unique to Christians either.

In Jewish writing later in the exilic period and post exile, we begin to see flirtations with concepts of resurrection. It was most often an answer to the profound quandary of why divine justice seems such a stranger to the way life here on earth actually works.

This disconnect, this dissonance—this repetitive reality that tells us again and again that the wicked prosper, that innocent people suffer, that lives can be cut short by the cruelest of turns, that people too often use their power to do great harm, can become too much to bear. And the human question cries out “how long” “why”?

And so mythic stories began to emerge in later Jewish antiquity with a variety of ways to understand resurrection's purpose: vindication, reward or punishment, and ways to redeem a battered nation.

Ezekiel's experience of the valley of dry bones coming to life was a message to the people of Israel—deportees, those oppressed and violated by the powers and principalities—your despair will be transformed. Nothing stands outside God's power and capability.

While the idea that God can do anything flows easily from our Jewish roots, Christian experiences of Resurrection occupied new territory by making a universal, even a cosmic claim.

The cosmic impact of Jesus' Resurrection was meant to expand the reach God's love and to enlarge our human capacity to receive and to be conduits of God's love. It was not meant to contract, to constrict the world.

Jesus' Resurrection is not about history or about science or about church dogma. And it certainly is not about closing the doors to heaven to people we feel inclined to label as beyond the pale. The Resurrection power that Christ shares with the world can be dangerous when misunderstood.

It is cosmic shift—an earthquake at the core of human aspiration and belief.

A true encounter with Resurrection doesn't just change the way we die—it changes the way we live.

This is a message of freedom, not a mechanism of exclusion or oppression.

An empty tomb is not what gives us this joy, this freedom from death's sting.

The empty tomb could be explained away in many ways (and Roman officials did just that in their accusation that Jesus' body was stolen by his disciples to create the appearance of his Resurrection). And all the stories of Jesus' post-Resurrection appearances in scripture are distinct—some even contradictory—they cannot be completely harmonized into one narrative.

Early Christians were attesting to several things: that Jesus's death was real (he was really dead), that Jesus was not resuscitated (resuscitation tales were not uncommon—and they were good news for an individual or a family, but they did not change lives across generations or start a new world religion), that Jesus did not just resume his previous life (he began a whole new mode of existence), and Resurrection didn't just happen to Jesus, it also happened to his followers.¹

Jesus' resurrection is a source of power—and it empowers us, it frees us to live in an in-between time and space participating in a love that never dies.

It is not because he was not there in that tomb, it is because he is here—loose in the world, sharing a love powerful enough to fuel a movement that changes hearts and lives for more than 2000 years now.

With such powerful love and freedom and joy infused into the world in the Jesus we claim to follow, how did Christians morph into the veritable party poopers of the world?

In one study, 90% of people ages 16-29 experienced Christians as judgmental—which was defined as arrogant and self-righteous.²

Another study found that children from religious families are particularly prone to being less kind, more punitive, and less altruistic.³

These statistics do not sound like resurrection stories—like glimpses of an expanded world, of a world more infused with a love that expands and encourages new life, freedom, courage—JOY. Where is the joy?

Resurrection expands life's reach—it does not contract, it does not constrict. We know Resurrection's mysterious power by the courage and vitality that it unleashes in the most unlikely places—in places where we are hard pressed to see anything but death.

Thomas was 10 years old on a spring day like today, walking with a friend when they decided to climb the tower of a high-tension electrical wire to see what they could see.⁴

That expanded horizon must have been beautiful to behold.

At some point Thomas slipped and a piece of his clothes got hung on a piece of the high voltage tower. When he reached up to try to free himself thousands of electrical volts coursed through his small body. He fell 100 feet with his clothes on fire.

Almost every bone broken, almost every inch of his skin burned, almost all internal organs damaged—there was little hope that Thomas could or would or even should survive.

The Harvard trained surgeon who cared for Thomas at the Shriner's Burn Institute in Boston described the burn unit as hell on earth.

When Thomas arrived, the doctor and his team did numerous painstaking skin grafts from human cadavers, trying to keep Thomas alive long enough to grow enough grafts from Thomas' own skin.

But there was too much skin lost and Thomas was rejecting the foreign grafts more and more quickly.

Death seemed like it would be a merciful release.

Thomas' catastrophic accident put a great deal of stress on his family—so much that his 42 year-old father died suddenly of a heart attack.

Thomas' mother asked if it might work to try Thomas' father's skin for one more attempt to save her son.

After much consternation and debate, the medical team decided to try the procedure—perhaps from some flicker of hope or maybe just from some scientific curiosity or impulse.

Thomas had been in a coma since paramedics got to him when he fell so when he began moving his limbs and trying to speak only a few hours after the surgery had ended, the doctor rushed to Thomas' side.

Thomas was trying to talk. "What happened to my father?" he said.

The doctor didn't have the heart to give him the cruel news that his father had died so he lied and said, "Your father is fine."

"Are you sure?" said Thomas. "I am sure," said the doctor, "And he'll be so happy to hear that you are improving."

"My dad's just standing there at the end of my bed. Why doesn't he say something?"

"Thomas," the doctor said, "Where do you see your father?"

"He's standing right there. Hi, Dad!" Thomas called out to an empty space at the end of his bed.

"Thomas, your dad's passed away," the doctor admitted. "He died 3 days ago of a heart attack."

Thomas' voice grew small and almost impossible to hear. "That must be his ghost then that's waving back to me."

A Holy moment—a moment of unexplainable power. Love weaving together heaven and hell.

Thomas didn't reject the grafts from his father. He became the only child in that burn unit to leave it permanently and re-enter life. He became the first human being in medical history to undergo an experimental skin replacement procedure that doctors were able to try on him.

Thomas left the burn unit severely disfigured, and he went on learn and grow, even to be an honor student at his school.

But the most startling testimony is Thomas' smile, a smile the doctor saw in a chance encounter with Thomas several years later. The smile tells the story of a mysterious and powerful joy. The doctor saw the smile of someone who is happy to be alive.

Such mysterious and vital joy, from a place that human rationality can strain to see anything but suffering and death.

Where do we let ourselves see and believe in the power of love to defy death, to stand in that mysterious liminal collapse of space and time where Resurrection stitches beauty into our pain, our loss, into our limited ways of seeing and knowing things and gives us something that seems such a stranger to us—Joy!

How willing are we to believe such joy can be true—in a world so laden with broken bodies and broken hearts?

Joy comes when we trust that God is at work in the world this way all the time—not just when we recognize it, not just when we trust it. It is a love that sings to dry bones and to bodies that seem better off dead and to grief that can't be spoken and to suffering that seems too much to bear.

Easter is calling us, Grace Covenant, to live and breathe and sing of this mysterious, magnificent, majestic way of LOVE.

And so, our Easter Sunday is nothing if not a startling sensation that washes over us. I cannot describe it; you and I cannot package it or contain it or control it—but when we open ourselves up, when we give ourselves to it—we feel it—we taste and see it, we are transformed by it.

Jesus was trying to tell us something that remains a difficult reality for us to receive and to trust—you and I live and breathe eternity every day—in life and in death.

It is more than resilience, more than a second chance—it is the fear and joy in the midst of a mother's grief that gives her legs the strength to run and tell those who felt like giving up—I have seen the Lord!

Rise up, Easter people! (stand) And sing to the world about the mysteries and the power of a love that will never die.

Thanks be to God.

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson's The Real Jesus explicates a helpful discussion of these points beginning on page 134.

² Barna Group Study, 2007, www.barna.com

³ The Negative Association Between Religiousness and Children's Altruism Across the World (*Current Biology*, 2015).

⁴ Allan J. Hamilton, M.D., FACS, Scalpel and the Soul: Encounters with Surgery, the Supernatural, and the Healing Power of Hope. (Penguin Press, 2008), 64-78.