

Easter Sunday
April 12, 2009
San Francisco Swedenborgian Church
Acts 10:34-43
John 20:1-18
“Inner/Outer Resurrection”
Rev Jeffrey Cheifetz

Acts 10:34-43

34Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. 36You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. 37That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: 38how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; 40but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, 41not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. 43All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

John 20:1-18

20Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” 3Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the

tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10Then the disciples returned to their homes. 11But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). 17Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Swedenborg

Seeing that 'the morning' in the proper sense means the Lord, His coming, and so the approach of His kingdom, what else is meant by 'the morning' becomes clear, namely the rise of a new Church, for that Church is the Lord's kingdom on earth. That kingdom is meant both in a general and in a particular sense, and indeed in a specific sense, the general being when any Church on earth is established anew; the particular, when a person is being regenerated and becoming a new man, for the Lord's kingdom is in that case being established in him and he is becoming the Church; and the specific, as often as good flowing from love and faith is at work with him, for this is what constitutes the Lord's coming. Consequently the Lord's resurrection on the third morning (John 20:1), embodies in the particular and the specific senses the truth that He rises daily, indeed every single moment, in the minds of regenerate persons.

Arcana Coelestia #2405.8

The Resurrection is the pivotal story of the Christian faith. The light cast by that event outshines everything else. The search for what the Resurrection means for humanity gave rise to the writings of the New Testament, the Christian Church, uncounted works of art and literature, and movements dedicated to the betterment of humanity and the whole of creation. We could examine the history of the Church's understanding of the Resurrection, the many conversations, arguments, theologies and cultural expressions of religious belief that are part of the Christian universe, and all of that would be very interesting and enlightening, and may help us to make Easter come alive in today's world. That, for me, is the point - making Easter an integral, or even central motif, metaphor, or symbol which guides how we live. We can enjoy Easter Day, the annual event that tells a wonderful story surrounded by symbols of new life - lilies and decorated eggs and bunnies - and also take it seriously for the living of our lives as we return to the Monday through Friday grind of making a living, deciding how to use our time and money, and figuring out what to make for dinner.

For myself, whenever the Easter season rolls around, I ask myself, more pointedly than usual, where resurrection is or is not happening in me and my family, in the church, and in the world. That's what it comes down to for me. If it isn't part of my life and the church's life and the world's life, then I want to know the reason why we are messing around with it in the first place? It's a good idea to take a reality check once in a while.

I want to see new life within myself: new depth of spirit, more willingness to forgive, more skilled listening, less fear, more playfulness. My work as a pastor, and specifically as an interim or transitional pastor, has heightened the importance of that question, because if my work within churches is not about resurrection, then I wonder what I am doing and why. And given that the media usually reports news about what is going wrong, it is always a struggle for me to see signs of new life within the complexity and diversity of the world's life.

I usually have less good news about my own life than I would like; perhaps I am too demanding of myself, but whatever. For example, when I look at my extended family relationships, I usually have to say that not much has happened, or at best perhaps I have had some really good conversations and connections, and perhaps some old tension has been eased. But, just recently, a cousin, my brother, and I got together to talk about our shared family history on my father's side, which includes comparing genealogical charts, and looking at relational patterns, health issues, and so on. This is a huge change, given that neither my mother's or father's families has ever been very good at maintaining a vital level of relationship, and it kind of came out of the blue. A couple of months ago my cousin and I were at her house talking about this and that, and some serious issues came up, and through some sudden tears she got all determined and forceful and passionate - which is what she is like anyway - about the three of us needing to start some new patterns for our relationship. And out of that came a new thing, complete with old letters and charts and photographs and stories, and with a deeper sense of connection than ever before.

Now about the Church, writ large. The Church is a repository of history, tradition, intellectual inquiry, and emotional connections. Churches are repositories of way too many diverse objects, out-of-date-books, and full file cabinets, that have been left behind for someone else to dispose of. The Church is usually the slowest to change of any community I know. It can be a place of growth, experimentation, community development, and radical inclusion. It can be a place for honesty, risk-taking, and changed lives. It can also be a place where we go through the motions. It used to have far more political and social influence in the world than it does now. It is in danger of dying, whether from low morale, cultural shifts that have left it grasping for the good old days, or a lack of vision of what could be in the future. It can be, and sometimes is, a place where new forms of worship and connection to the larger community come into being and flourish.

I have always said, mainly to myself, but sometimes to others, that I have no interest in playing church - that is, in reducing the explosive

and revolutionary message of the Scriptures to a routine of going through the liturgical motions - so that we all end up feeling somewhat better, Amen. Now we all need some sense of encouragement and uplift for the next week, and that's what I hope for myself and others. But if that is the limit of what we are about, then God help us. God is not in the business of making us feel good so we can go back into our everyday lives unchanged. God is larger than that. And if we become too difficult a community to become part of, like an exclusive club, or a close-knit family, then we run the danger of encasing the dynamic message of new life in a vacuum. The Lord came to give new life to all, not to be relegated to one or two hours on Sunday morning.

Like I said, I also look for resurrection in the larger world: for breakthroughs in relationships between people of diverse racial backgrounds, gender identification, generations, and political and religious beliefs; for signs that federal and state budgets are allocated toward the needs of the least powerful and most needy; for corporations that act out of motivations that go far beyond the bottom line, to make this world healthier and more just. I want to see movie stars and sports figures who understand that the world is larger than their egos. I yearn for more money to go toward clean water, education, good housing, agricultural development, and reliable infrastructure, and less money for warfare. Ecumenical and interfaith dialogue gives me hope for a better world. More people consciously engaging in life-giving spiritual practices individually and corporately is a good sign.

Now, I don't think all these thoughts whenever I read the Biblical accounts of Jesus' resurrection. Usually I try to imagine what it all looked and felt like when taken literally. And then words and images stand out from the text, and I note those, and look for the meanings for my own life. What I noticed this time was the tenacity of Mary Magdalene. Out of great grief and fear she did all she could. When Peter and the other disciple returned home, Mary stayed and took one last look into the tomb, as though hoping against hope, as though she thought that if she looked again, something would happen. And it did, as she saw the angels, and then Jesus, whom she

thought was the caretaker of the place. It was when Jesus spoke her name that she heard and saw the truth. Out of that encounter she then told the gathered disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'.

'I have seen the Lord' - the only one of the three to do so at the empty tomb. She saw and heard the good news that death itself was overcome, and that Jesus was alive. She saw that the world had changed. She knew she had changed. And it all happened simply because she showed up, she stuck around, she held her ground. In her grief she kept seeking a way to do what was right and good. She received renewed hope, clarity, and wisdom, and she was the first witness of the resurrection to the disciples themselves.

What I draw from this text this time around is the following: we all have our own ideas about what resurrection in today's world and in our own lives and in the life of our church looks like. Most of those ideas and images are probably very good ones. We hold them in our heart, and wish and pray that they will happen, and we might do a few things that are in line with those prayers. We show up, hang out, stand our ground, we hold onto our hopes and dreams. Once in a while we take another look, just to make sure.

When it comes down to it, resurrection happens in its own time, in its own way. We may or may not perceive it right away even when it is right in front of us. We must remember that no human being saw the actual moment of resurrection inside that tomb. The actual event itself was a mystery, and it remains a mystery, hidden.

But we see the results, though usually much later than we prefer. We see houses rebuilt after flood and fire, we see people fed, we see justice done in court sometimes years after a wrong was committed. We see relationships between antagonistic groups improve, we see families reconciled, we see people recover from disasters. We see people join faith communities, we see old divisions heal, and we see some enter into new depths of faith. We even see ourselves, here and there, become better listeners, less judgmental of others and more forgiving of ourselves, more willing to help where we can, more

patient, more willing to take risks based upon how we perceive God leading us.

Hidden away in all of it is the small shy mustard seed of the kingdom of God, in which human beings become more the people they are meant to become, where the sunlight of peace shines a little brighter, and where the inner assurance that we are loved beyond measure grows into a great tree.

The Art of Believing

I wish to see
the hand of God
in everything.

Which is easy,
of course, when
things are easy.

But what of the
struggle, what
of the pain, what,

indeed, of the
suffering of Jesus,
the most Beloved

of all. The most
Beloved. Can I
see God's hand

even there, resting
on the back of his
Beloved – all during

the agony, all during
the scourging, all
during the excruciating

dying and death. Do
I believe the hand of
God was only waiting

to lift his Beloved up
again – waiting until
our hearts were

settled – until our
sorrow yielded space –
until we were truly

free. Free to see
the hand of God
in everything.

Christine Rodgers
Easter 2009

So be it.