

“Dead and Alive” - Easter Sunday

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Introduction to the Epistle Lesson –

This letter is written to the church in the Greek city of Colosse – a place Paul has not visited, but he writes to encourage the fledgling church there. The letter reflects issues that were crucial to the early church – emphasizing the centrality of Jesus Christ as the revelation of God and of Jesus’ death and resurrection as God’s saving grace for the world. And in this brief passage from Colossians 3, Paul connects those who follow Jesus very closely to his death and resurrection...

This past week I came up with some ideas for a new series of Easter Greeting cards – my own special design – and I am confident about this Easter Greeting card series of mine that the cards would be a huge failure in the commercial market – I am certain they will never be produced and would never sell even if they were.

Here are my Easter Card ideas: one design is to have pictured on the inside of the card a number of beautiful butterflies fluttering in the air – and on the cover of the card there are a number of dead butterflies; the cover of the card would say “these butterflies are dead” – and then the inside would say “these butterflies are alive” – “Happy Easter.” The next in the series is much the same: the inside of the card with a picture of beautiful flowers in full blossom – and on the cover there are a number of dead, lifeless flowers; the cover of the card would say “these flowers are dead” – and then the inside would say “these flowers are alive” – “Happy Easter.” How do you like them so far? – I think that gives you enough of an idea of the series – I’m not even going to mention the bunnies or the chicks as part of the series, OK...!?

Now as much as we all know that I or anyone else wouldn’t make such cards – the design I have in mind isn’t so far off from what you might actually see – at least with the *living* butterflies and flowers part; but what you would expect to see on the cover of such cards is a cocoon, a chrysalis, that then hatches into the beauty of a butterfly; what you might expect to see on the cover is the bud of a flower, or a shoot of green coming out of the earth, or even just a seed, and then it bursts into full bloom as a vibrant flower. Those are images of life bursting forth – life renewed – life coming into fullness – and they are wonderful Easter images; I am not here today to be the Scrooge of Easter to say humbug to butterflies and flowers – it’s hard enough to believe those are coming anyway on a snowy Easter weekend in March!

But what I want to remind us of on this Easter day is that there is something imperfect in those images of butterflies emerging - flowers blooming – eggs hatching – those are images of life refreshed and renewed, but they are life from life – things dormant

or developing that come to fruition. But at the center of this celebration of Easter and the event, the story, that it tells, is not a natural event of life from life, but something very unnatural: life from death – not simply refreshment and renewal, but re-surrection – resurrection – dead, then alive.

What that points us to is that there is something in the scripture we've heard today that we need to decide if we are going to take literally – and if we do, decide what that means for us. What we need to decide to take literally is not if Jesus actually died – that is made clear in the Gospel story and it has always been the faith of the Church; what we need to decide to take literally is not if Jesus actually rose from the dead – that too is made very clear in the Gospel stories, and that reality has always been the faith of the Church – “Christ is Risen; Christ is Risen indeed!”

It's not those things - what I think we need to decide to take literally or not is this little phrase we heard from what Paul writes in the letter to the Colossians: “you have died” – Paul says – “you have died.” Is that meant literally or not? Well, there is some pretty good argument to NOT take it literally – the main thing being: here we are! – we're alive! – living – not dead yet! So it couldn't be a literal thing Paul meant for his readers then or now...Paul must be using 'died' as some sort of image – which Paul often does in this letter and others – death both as an image of sin in us, and also death as a putting away sinful ways within us. Paul will at the same time talk about sin as a deadly power at work in us, and that faith puts to death sin within us – ‘sin is death’, and. we ‘die to sin.’ And that is a powerful image – sin being like death and faith being the death of sin.

But – Paul doesn't say ‘it is as if you have died’ – Paul doesn't say, ‘this is like death’ – Paul says “you have died” – quite clearly – literally, it seems. And I think it is very important that we do take those words literally for us today – because I think we would want to take what is said just before it literally too– Paul says: ‘you have been raised with Christ’ – we are linked to the resurrection of Christ – the new, risen, victorious,

eternal, resurrected life of Jesus Christ – we share in the life of Christ’s rising. But that welcome description of life with Christ for us is linked with this: “you have died” – because that is, literally, the only way you can be raised – risen from the dead - only if you have died.

What happens here is that the story of death and resurrection is shifted from the locations we might be most accustomed to – not just Jesus dying and living again; not just our physical death and risen to eternal life; but death and resurrection here and now - in our lives – literally. Death and life – what would it mean for us to hear that here, in the location of our lives?

So that’s some cheery news to hear on Easter day – ‘you have died’! But what I think that means for us is a recognition of the true power of sin and brokenness in this world – the stunning reality of death that is present within us and among us. It is a power that is inflicted and expressed in many ways, obvious and subtle. When I act in ways that do not reflect God’s way of love (which is the summary for all that God wills for me and this world) – when I inflict harm on myself or others through my choices – then sin kills something in me – I am diminished; sin through me can destroy something in others – in this world; the same is true for you... If you look elsewhere in Colossians, Paul gives some laundry lists of sin, but I think he really only scratches the surface – it is deadly stuff we can inflict on each other...

But it neither begins nor ends there – there are things done *to* me as well, and to others – there is hurt received that does deadly harm. There are people caught in circumstances of suffering, brokenness, injustice, despair, violence – there are broken people and broken relationships – situations very personal, and circumstances broad and global. And if we will face and feel those things, I don’t think I have to convince anyone to take literally the power of what is at work there – there are things that die in us and others: love, hope, joy, health, peace – there is death at work within, literally, and death that happens physically too

as the violence of sin and brokenness takes hold. We know about death in us and in this world.

But just in case there is any cheer left in you, there's more death to consider. I think what must also happen in taking in the literal-ness of "you have died" is to come to a realization of our own inability to change it – to die to our own illusion of power to fix it. Which simply means the answer is not just a good pep talk for renewal and encouragement; the answer is not to try harder or do better; the answer is not just to progress or evolve – because, dead things can't do that – they're dead. What dead things need is resurrection – and they can't do that on their own.

I know that my self-designed Easter greeting cards of dead things and living things will never be a success, but at least they might point us toward the real story, the literal narrative, of our lives:

- sin is not just a problem or a big challenge: it is death – in need of resurrection
- hurt inflicted on you is not just a painful inconvenience: it is death – in need of resurrection
- despair is not just a difficult feeling: it is death – in need of resurrection
- injustice/racism/intolerance are not just circumstances to fix: they are death – in need of resurrection
- war is not just a conflict to resolve: it is death – in need of resurrection

And because it is death - only God can do that – can bring resurrection – only the Spirit of God breathes the life needed – only the Risen Christ leads the way out of death. Our lives and our world are broken beyond our own fixing: we have encountered and propagated death – and it would seek to kill any hope left in us and this world. But God in Christ intervenes with life – which starts on the cross: the cross of Christ exposes death for the false power it is – the death of Christ embraces all the death of this world – and death itself dies in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is actually new life – there is the reality that love and grace, forgiveness and reconciliation, hope and peace are the truth of creation.

There is the reality of resurrection in which we are empowered, given life in which to live: and through the Spirit of God in Christ this gift of resurrection is revealed to us with many names – resurrection is called things like...forgiveness, mercy, love, service, justice, commitment, endurance, sacrifice, hope, joy, faith, kindness, compassion, vision, community, empowerment, reconciliation, gentleness, healing, grace, life... Resurrection brings things to life in us, and in this world – and it happens again and again – despite our failings and fears – because it is about the life of God in Christ that cannot fail or fade, giving life again and again – giving grace that does not end – and life is restored – literally.

There's one more thing about having died – and it's good news – having died, death has lost its power over us – over me, you, this world. That does not mean death is not strong, still – we know it is – it wrestles us and this world violently... but we are held by something stronger - and Colossians gives this beautiful image to express that reality: Paul says we have died and we are raised and that our lives are “hidden in God”, which expresses an ancient meaning of that word “hidden” – it doesn't mean lost or secret or absent or passive – it means we are wrapped up in, held within the life of God – that we are tucked into God's living presence in the world. There is one commentator who says this image is the ‘poetry of hope’ (William Loader), and I like that – it is a way to express the truth that we, dead and alive, are held in the life-giving Spirit of God who brings resurrection to us and the world.

Sisters and brothers, this Easter day and each day we know death, we have died – and what we need is not cheery news but resurrection news: Jesus Christ who knows death, as we and this world does - and brings God's gift of new life, literally - our lives now and always hidden, held, risen in the life-giving presence of God – that is our hope and the hope of the world this day.

AMEN.