

STORIES OF THE RESURRECTION

It is early. You came out to greet The Great Dawn – to acknowledge the truth that changes all life for us: Jesus is back from the dead and alive for each of us, and for all of us. We don't mean to be disrespectful of any other faith or culture; we don't mean to be insensitive or argumentative or uncaring of other people's convictions or beliefs. But we really do mean *for all of us*. Jesus is back from the dead – alive forever, present even here and now as the Holy Spirit of Jesus the Christ – *for all of us*: tracking all of us, working to redeem and to sanctify all of us – all of us everywhere, throughout the whole world. That is our faith. We know that others use other names, and some have different concepts altogether; freedom is good. And we know that Jesus does not coerce, so that is not *our* agenda either. But we still get to name and claim our faith, sing praises, and rejoice: JESUS IS SAVIOR! And Jesus is good at what He does. So we have confidence – for ourselves, and for everybody.

That is the story from our side, win, lose, or draw. That is our conviction – the truth we live by and live for, whether we have it right or wrong. It is too late for most of us – that is, too late to be fair or unbiased or open-minded about it. At least it is for me. I have not been open-minded about Easter for many years now. If the President of the United States or the Dalai Lama or God in some new manifestation walked right out of Heaven and told me that Jesus did not rise from the dead, I flat-out would not believe them. It's too late for me. I bought it. Oh, it has nothing to do with any merit or worth on my part; quite the reverse. But that doesn't matter anymore either. And yes, I still have scattered moments here and there, moods I get in, where my own doubts surface again. But it's too late for me. I flat-out do not believe even myself when I get in those moods. Even my own doubts have become picayune and pathetic when it comes to the Resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

Well, you didn't come here to work or to think on a morning like this. You came here to sing and rejoice, to praise God and give thanks, and to love and hug each other in Jesus' name. That is as it should be. And that really is what matters. But since we're here ... well, you know me: Come, let us also think together. Let us back up, to before our own Easter Faith, and take a quick run through the journey again, the part we know so far. Remembering the story again is how humans best celebrate.

Why is God playing games with us? If there *is* a God, that is. Isn't that where a lot of us start out – wondering if there even is a God? We are born into this absolutely beautiful place – snow on the mountains; sun in the sky; stars at night; water, sex, boats, and people; so many exciting and wonderful things to do and possibilities to explore. When we are young, we can hardly wait to get out into it all. But even from the beginning, we also know there are problems. Mommy says we can't go beyond the backyard. But we've already explored the backyard! Yet the last time we went beyond it, we got scolded or even spanked. How exceedingly prophetic for all that is to come.

There are always problems with getting to all the wonderful, beautiful things “out there”: we are shy, or poor, or afraid; we have to do our homework first; we have to get a degree before we can do something; the right people don't think we are the right people. Or we actually do get “out there” but we do it wrong and hurt something, or hurt ourselves, or even worse, hurt somebody else.

Why is God playing games with us? If there is a God. The older we get, the more we see the rest – the part that is not beautiful. At first we think it is only an accident, or maybe only us, or maybe only in our family. With luck and strong effort, maybe we can get loose – get out to where the good stuff is. But it is not only us. And if it *is* an accident, at least it is happening everywhere. There *is* beauty out there, but this place is also jam-packed with sorrow and pain and misery and despair. Not only do the birds sing, but the cat creeps up on them. Sometimes one mistake can undo years of effort. Sometimes years of faithful effort do not produce anything worthwhile that we can see. Why is God playing games with us ... if there is a God?

A few of us are aware – we are even knowing and admitting it now – that we are getting older all the time. Older and older. Those of you who are not getting older have no problem with it, but those of us who *are* getting older wonder: What do we have to look forward to? Nothing in this physical realm suggests a good future. We would all like to believe in a better future, but destruction and disaster are only a matter of time. And there are no exceptions. Well, no exceptions in this world as we know it – no exceptions on the physical plane. The best we can hope for, as we get older, is that we can watch those who are younger than we are ... as they get older and older. That is actually fun, as far as it goes, but it is hardly comforting.

What do we have to pit against all this certain reality? STORIES OF THE RESURRECTION. Seems sort of flimsy, doesn't it? STORIES OF THE RESURRECTION ... against all the chaos and mayhem of this world: all the war and travail; all the refugees; all the pollution; all the hospitals; all the terrorists; all the racism; all the broken hearts, broken bodies, broken dreams, broken promises. Against all of this we stack our STORIES OF THE RESURRECTION. Seems sort of flimsy, doesn't it? Unless, of course, *we actually believe them*.

Oh, I don't mean we think we *ought* to believe them. I don't mean we think we are *supposed* to believe them. I am not suggesting it would make any difference whatsoever to just go on telling the stories because it's that time of year and "it's the custom to do that sort of thing, you know." But what if something happens – begins to happen – deep inside us? Not something we contrive or even control, but something that just begins to come over us – to be "that way" for us; to be the thing that really is truer for us than all our old perceptions and beliefs. What happens if THE RESURRECTION STORIES really do become our truth?

The old word for it is "conversion." To convert = to change. But convert from what ... to what? Why, convert from physical dimension to spiritual dimension, of course. It does not mean "Once I was bad and now I am good." The world keeps trying to twist it back down into that, but that is a travesty. It is neither a big enough change nor one that will last long enough to be worth diddly. It's way back down to the American level of Christmas: you be good and Santa Claus will bring you a present; if you are extremely lucky, the present might not break for several years. Hardly the Resurrection.

Conversion is a true and major transformation. It means that we literally do not see or perceive on the same level anymore. "Once I was blind, but now I can see" is a phrase of deep significance in Christendom. Though it actually sounds pompous to some outsiders, it is a phrase of deep wonder and humility among Christians. Through no fault of our own – out of some place we cannot imagine, never mind control – somehow life is just not seen or perceived or experienced from the same dimension anymore. We had been locked-in and locked-on to mundane, physical, overt realities. On that plane, there is no meaningful hope – there is nothing to suggest a good future. Destruction and disaster are only a matter of time. Many of us had even come to accept that, to be content with that. At least it would soon be over. Who cares. Good riddance.

But sometimes we get converted – changed. Nothing looks the same. How old we are is irrelevant. Losing loved ones – once our deepest reality – is a contradiction in terms. You never lose what you love. Jesus cancels out the concept of goodbye. There are still delays and times of separation, but the dread and terror and cynicism – and all the pretenses that we “don’t really care anyway” – are all gone. Pitted against them all are THE RESURRECTION STORIES. He is risen!

The cover just blew off. I mean, the whole ceiling just went. The ceiling on all of life is gone. It does not mean we merely added a second story to our philosophical house – you know, we get to live on the first story in this life now, and then we get to go live on the second story (Heaven) after we die. That is worse than where we started. If it is a bad deal to begin with, why prolong it? Why drag it out? No, when the ceiling blows – when we get converted, changed – everything is different. It is not a two-story house. It is not that we are here and it’s bad, and then we go there and it’s good. The whole thing – life, people, God, relationship, purpose – everything is full of endless wonder NOW, not later. Well, later too, of course. But now also. *“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”* (II Corinthians 5:17) Nothing in that text suggests “later” – nothing in there implies waiting for another place. It starts NOW, as soon as we awaken to it.

Have I confused anybody? No, of course not. That’s why you’re here. Easter is not minuscule. “Jesus rose from the dead. So after you finish out your life here just the way it’s going, then you get to go to Heaven, where all your problems are over – where your adventures, lessons, excitement, and growth are all over.” Not hardly! Resurrection means you can never be truly and deeply afraid, ever again – starting right now. Resurrection means your life is full of absolutely endless possibilities – beginning instantly. Resurrection means you cannot see any person, any event – anything going on anywhere – as simply a mundane, physical, this-world-only affair. It is vast beyond all our conceiving, and God is with us – and always will be.

Every conversion is a story of resurrection. No other power changes us toward hope and trust and believing in a good future. We are converted – changed from a physical to a spiritual perspective, awareness, point of view, belief. The words are always inadequate, but the reality is full of wonder. And life starts to regroup, to reorganize, to move toward a whole different vision of what is going on and why we are here.

So, since the first Easter Sunday morning, we have been telling THE RESURRECTION STORIES. And, you understand, from that very first morning until *this* morning, most people do not really believe them. The stories seem flimsy. They don't seem like very much to pit against all the chaos, fear, anger, despair, pain, and destruction going on in this very physical, very limited sphere. At least not until something changes inside us and we start to really believe them. So remember that also, and have a little patience and compassion for those who do not yet believe them. But do go on telling the stories ... and living them.

There are lots of stories and lots of ways to tell them. You see, in many ways, the entire history and life of the Christian church through all these centuries have simply been about telling, retelling, and continuing to tell THE RESURRECTION STORIES. Once we have the change – the conversion – we start to see them everywhere. We even look back on our own lives, to before we became aware, and realize that God was already there – that the truth was already working – even though we of course had not yet noticed it.

Way back in the tenth chapter of Luke, for instance, long before the Easter event, Jesus sent His disciples out on a preaching/healing mission. They returned amazed at what they were able to accomplish. And Jesus was very pleased and thrilled about it all. In His congratulations and rejoicing over their fine performance, He commented: *“I have given you the power to tread underfoot snakes and scorpions and all the forces of the enemy.”* (Luke 10:19) He went on: *“Nothing will ever harm you.”* Who in the world was He talking to? What in the world could He have meant? Among others, the twelve disciples were there: Judas, who later hung himself; John, who, tradition says, lived to be over a hundred but still died; all the rest, who were eventually martyred, dying violent deaths. Some people consider that harm. *“Nothing will ever harm you”?! I don't think Jesus was confused and I don't think He was teasing or kidding one bit. But if you hear this comment before the change (conversion), it sounds like absolute idiocy, or a bold-faced lie.*

THE RESURRECTION STORIES are endless, and that is because there are new ones every day. And the old ones never grow dim. They get told by many different people, in many different ways. They all point to the same thing: the change, the conversion. The physical is a small part of reality, and the spiritual is all around us even now. Some people claim to have found this truth apart from Jesus, and prefer it that way. Fine

for them. I am not trying to be in charge of everybody's truth. I only know that there is none of it for me apart from Jesus. When I hear RESURRECTION STORIES, Jesus is right in the middle of them, whether anybody names Him or thanks Him or not.

Neither am I surprised any longer at the variety of the stories: a stone rolled away; a Damascus Road; a first-step story; a hatred healed; a marriage reconciled – repentance, conversion, New Life. He is risen! Indeed, and where else comes the power that keeps drawing us and leading us toward light and LIFE?

Shall I tell you about Emmaus? It pretty much tells itself, doesn't it? Just another RESURRECTION STORY, stuck right in here (in the twenty-fourth chapter of Luke) along with the great ones. How come they didn't recognize Him at first? I don't know; how come *we* don't? How come He was known to them in the breaking of the bread? I don't know; how come He still is to this day?

If you have believed THE RESURRECTION STORIES, you are converted, changed. You cannot help it. Life simply cannot look the same from Resurrection perspective. If you are converted, then you believe THE RESURRECTION STORIES. The two are synonymous – inseparable. No one can believe THE RESURRECTION STORIES and stay the same. There is no way to fake it, and no ulterior motives will work. Outward circumstances can neither bring nor destroy Easter. And this reminds us that once we do see, nothing in this world can take it away from us. Happily, that is in the very nature of the "*Hallelujah!*" cry, and part of its power and our gratitude.

W.E. Sangster was a British Methodist born in London in 1900. After a distinguished career as pastor and denominational leader, Sangster was stricken with a progressive muscular atrophy. By 1958, he was seriously affected. For two more years, he endured his suffering before dying in 1960. One Easter day, in the grips of the disease, unable to walk or speak, he wrote to his daughter: "It is terrible to wake up on Easter morning and have no voice with which to shout, 'He is risen! He is risen indeed!' But it would be far more terrible still, to have a voice, and not *want* to shout." (*20 Centuries of Great Preaching*, Volume 11, by Fant and Pinson, Jr.)

Is he feeling sorry for any of you?

He is risen ...