

I Only Want To Hope You

If anyone doubts the reality of miracles, I'd just remind you of Google.

I'll tell you what led me to begin this way today.

The other morning, as is our custom when we sit down to break our fast, I read a prayer from a book of meditations we are currently using. This is what I read:

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We pray for children
who sneak popsicles before supper
who erase holes in math workbooks,
who can never find their shoes.

And we pray for those
who stare at photographers from behind barbed wire,
who can't bound down the street in a new pair of
sneakers,
who never "counted potatoes,"
who are born in places we would be caught dead,
who never go to the circus,
who live in an X-rated world.

We pray for children
who bring us sticky kisses and fistfuls of dandelions,
who hug us in a hurry and forget their lunch money.

And we pray for those
who never get dessert,
who have no safe blanket to drag behind them,
who watch their parents watch them die,
who can't find any bread to steal,

who don't have any rooms to clean up,
whose pictures aren't on anybody's dresser,
whose monsters are real.

We pray for children
who spend all their allowance before Tuesday,
who throw tantrums in the grocery store and pick at
their food,
who like ghost stories,
who shove dirty clothes under the bed, and never rinse
out the tub,
who get visits from the tooth fairy,
who don't like to be kissed in front of the carpool,
who squirm in church or temple and scream in the phone,
whose tears we sometimes laugh at and
whose smiles can make us cry.

And we pray for those
whose nightmares come in the daytime,
who will eat anything,
who have never seen a dentist,
who aren't spoiled by anybody,
who go to bed hungry and cry themselves to sleep
who live and move, but have no being.

We pray for children who want to be carried
and for those who must,
for those we never give up on and for those
who don't get a second chance.

For those we smother . . . and for those who will grab
the hand of anybody kind enough to offer it.

* * *

I read that prayer and said that it was attributed to
Ina Huges. We both said, "Who is Ina Hughs?" As has

become our answer to so many of the questions we pose, "We could Google it." And, I did.

I'm putting a link to this former columnist of the Knoxville, Tennessee newspaper. She was also Poet Laureate for Tennessee. She now, according to her biography, lives in a cabin on a cove off of the Tennessee River. If you go to the link you can read other of her offerings.

(<http://www.knoxnews.com/staff/ina-hughs/>)

Ina Huges' prayer perfectly fits how I wanted to begin this last talk in the series I've been doing on "Rethinking Resurrection." The notion of resurrection grew out of the struggle spiritual people had with the givens of life. For some, to paraphrase Dickens, it was the best of times. For others, the worst.

This has, of course, always been the case for we humans. Added to the inevitability of suffering that all humans experience at some point, is the sheer inhumanity that we are capable of perpetrating on our brothers and sisters. Further, more often than not, this cruelty and oppression in the many forms it has taken has been committed in the name of God and/or religion. Resurrection was a response to injustice.

The hope of resurrection is not just whistling in the dark or wishful thinking. It is, as I am contending today, a defiant hope in the real experience of the Sacred.

If you look at the chronological development of the notion of resurrection, you will see that long before any narrative was told about the resurrection of Jesus it was presented as a mystical experience.

Everybody has heard the phrase "a Damascus road experience." It comes from the story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Saul was going to Damascus, after the stoning death of Stephen, who was executed because of a speech he gave to the Jewish authorities accusing them of not only murdering Jesus but also it was a speech in which he also stressed the universality of God. It is worth your reading the entirety of the seventh chapter of Acts. It is a long speech. Saul was a witness to this execution. Saul saw it as his mission, he had not been asked to do this, to hunt down the followers of Jesus and kill them himself.

Paul was an educated, Greek-speaking Jew and citizen of one of the wealthiest cities in the Roman Empire. He was zealously devoted to the Temple and the Law and, at that time according to his own writing, saw himself as a persecutor of the church.

While on his way to Damascus he had an ecstatic experience that would change everything for him and affect our lives as well. After all, this is "St. Paul's."

The story has it that as he approached the city gates with his traveling companions, he was suddenly struck by a light from heaven flashing all around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul said.

The reply broke through the blinding light, "I am Jesus."

He went on to Damascus where a man, Ananias, laid hands upon him and restored his sight. Immediately, something like scales dropped from his eyes and he saw. He

changed his name to Paul and began preaching the risen Jesus, not to Jews, but to non-Jews.

Scholars say that this story is another parable, this one told by Luke. Paul himself never mentions such a dramatic experience. In Luke's telling of the story, it is Paul and not any of the apostles who is the true successor to Jesus. Paul himself claims the right and identity as an apostle basing that claim on his having seen the risen Jesus.

There was a great controversy in the early Jesus movement about Paul and his work. The apostles saw their mission and the future of the movement to be exclusively Jewish. Paul didn't share this view and he took the movement in an entirely different direction.

For Paul, Jesus put an end to the Jewish law. Which is contrary to Jesus' teaching. Here you can see the beginning of the "Christ of faith" movement which we will be talking much about later. Paul is not concerned with the historical Jesus.

For now what I want to say is that Paul over and over again states that "Christ died for the sake of our sins, according to the scriptures; that he was buried and that he rose again on the third day, according to the scriptures; that he was seen by" and, then, depending on which version you are reading there is a list of people given who have "seen" the risen Jesus. Several things about this formula are very important.

First of all, the phrase "according to the Scriptures" is itself an assertion of faith because in the entire history of Jewish thought there is not a single line of scripture that says the messiah is to suffer, die, and rise again on the third day.

Second, the claim about "seeing" the risen Jesus is very early in the tradition and points to the mystical and transformative experience of those who believed that in Jesus God had said yes to a different kind of future. As Marcus Borg titles his chapter on this matter: "Executed by Rome, Vindicated by God."

Jesus himself was a Jewish mystic and his first true followers had been courageous enough, committed enough, open enough - perhaps desperate enough as well; to enter into that realm of mysticism. Where resurrection reality has been robbed of its power is when the emphasis has been on its public factuality rather than its mystical reality.

When that happens the question of faith more often than not becomes, "Do you really believe this happened?" Was the tomb really empty? Can this stand up to rigorous historical inquiry? As Borg puts it, "Easter faith becomes believing that these utterly unique and spectacular events happened on a particular Sunday and for a few weeks afterward a long time ago. For Christian fundamentalists the factual questions dominate and the really meaningful questions remain unanswered. The meaning of resurrection for the early followers was that God had vindicated and exalted Jesus and not Caesar as a way to be and and as a way to be in the world."

There is an old saying, "Where there is life, there is hope."

As is true with many "old sayings," that's wrong. It's just the other way around. "Where there is hope, there is life." Without hope people sicken and die.

We talked in here a few weeks ago about developmental stages in moral and spiritual development. I mentioned

then the work of Erik Erikson. In his developmental schema he places hope as the first requirement of a healthy person. All the other strengths of full life - will, purpose, competence, identity, intimacy, caring, wisdom - they all rest on hope.

Hope, and this is what you see in people who know resurrection, is given to those who are so free that nothing can be taken away from them. Hope is the state of having nothing and, yet, possessing all things. Hope is the high and driving freedom that compels people to give themselves in love to the people and causes they love. At the same time, paradoxically, they know that there doesn't have to be a payoff.

Resurrection meant for the early followers, and can mean for us, that death did not defeat Jesus and would not defeat them. They were confident that they would survive whatever came, even if it killed them.

Resurrection is a decision. It is not one that comes during the bright and sunny days when all is well with us and our world; not one that comes when life just seems to be humming along. Resurrection is a decision made in the dark, where there is pain and despair. Resurrection is decided for in the shadow of death. Resurrection is decided for when there seems to be little evidence to support it.

Resurrection is not about what we expect from life. Resurrection is about what life expects from us.

I think that over the course of centuries church dogma and religious arrogance have taken resurrection's arm and twisted it behind its back and made it say what we thought we wanted to hear rather than what it really wants to say. We have wanted certainty and security.

No telling how many Easter sermons have been preached on the question, "Is there life after death?" The issue resurrection deals with is, "Is there life after birth?"

Resurrection is about being raised to a new kind of life in the now. It is not about a world off there in the future. A lot of so-called Christian teaching would imply that all one has to do is tread water and tough it out until this preliminary act is over because the main show is yet to come.

This Christianity makes Jesus very unlike us. He is someone so special that we can't even fit in his category. But, if he is not like us, if his death is not like ours, if he really didn't suffer through that death because he knew somewhere in the back of his mind that three days later everything would have a happy ending, what does this have to do with us, our lives, our deaths.

When Bach wrote a piece of music, he didn't write it merely to be admired. He wrote it to be reproduced. Once an individual like Bach has created the harmony, you don't have to be a Bach to reproduce it. It can be played again and again. So with this Jesus. His faith, his reverence for human personality, his practice of love, his facing up to death was not just creating a piece of music for the world to stand before, look at and say, "Oh, how magnificent." We are to reproduce it, using the same human instruments he had until the whole world should be full of that kind of music.

There is, to me, a most wonderful line in a parable the early community formed about Jesus. Jesus friend Lazarus has died and Jesus eventually goes to his home. One of his sisters complains to Jesus, "If you had been here, this wouldn't have happened you know." Jesus

says, Mary, don't you believe in the resurrection?"
"Yes," she responds, "I believe in the resurrection and the judgment at the last day." Jesus' response is, "Mary, I am the resurrection."

Living in Christ is living this defiant power.

I read a prayer once written by W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois was the first African American to received a doctorate from Harvard. He dedicated his life to insisting on full civil rights for African Americans. He knew first hand of trials and tribulations. Here is the prayer he wrote:

* * *

It is the wind and the rain, O God, the cold and the storm that make this earth of Thine to blossom and bear its fruit. So in our lives it is storm and stress and hurt and suffering that make real men and women bring the world's work to its highest perfection. Let us learn then in these growing years to respect the harder sterner aspects of life together with its joy and laughter, and to weave them all into the great web which hangs holy to the Lord.

* * *

That's resurrection faith.

We come into the world and the tribe into which we are born gives us a script to read in the drama that becomes our lives. We go through life mostly unconscious about this. We do what we have been programmed to do, believe we are expected or supposed to do. We read our scripts.

To experience resurrection we have to become aware of this unconscious script-reading and change the script. That is what it means to repent.

I'm going to call this new script the resurrection script. I don't know it all but I can give you, from our tradition, some of the major lines of it so you can get a sense of a new drama. You will have to find your own place in the play and give your own performance. Let's call it the Holy Script. Listen:

And please remember, this is a drama. It is not the ten o'clock news.

To paraphrase Marcus Borg, I don't know if any of this ever happened but I know it is true.

* * *

In the beginning was the blueprint and the blueprint became flesh and came to live among us to show us how to build lives on solid rock rather than shifting sand.

God so loves the world that God gave us this blueprint.

Those who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

There is nothing in all of creation that can separate us from this love.

Give us our daily bread.

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

Go home, prodigal. Hurry up. Everybody's going to be glad to see you. Except the elder brother. And, the fatted calf.

Love God.

Love your neighbor.

Love your enemy.

After all, these people are also you.

Go two miles if you have to.

Feed the hungry. Water the thirsty. Clothe the naked.
Minister to the sick.

Don't be afraid to go to prison to visit a friend or
someone who needs a friend.

Become all things to all people in order to give them a
word of release.

Become Jew, Greek radical, reformer, black, Afghan,
Chinese, rich man, poor man, Indian chief.

Love one another because you have been loved.

Love one another because that's the way you pass from
death into life.

Tear up the roof if you have a friend who needs to see
this.

Or, climb a tree, Zacchaeus, if you need to see it
yourself.

Don't hold back.

Let go with hosannas and palms.

Can't afford to miss the last supper either.

Don't count Judas out. This love is wondrously strange.

And, don't be too hard on Simon Peter because you've done the same thing yourself.

If we have been baptized with Jesus in a death like his, will we not also rise with him in a resurrection like his?

I thirst.

Father, forgive them.

You will be with me.

It is finished.

Into your hands I give my self.

Let's go back to fishing.

Well, we really ought not leave without paying our last respects.

The tomb is empty.

He is not here.

Don't ask me.

He is risen.

He is risen, indeed.

O death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory?

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth.

No matter how hard you try, no matter how dark it gets, you can't hold back the dawn.

* * *

The earliest confession of faith or creed of the Jesus movement was, Jesus is Lord.

As the church grew and developed and, under the order of Constantine, was required to "get its act together," other creedal statements began to be formulated. The first of these was the one we use in our liturgy, The Apostles' Creed. Then, in 325, came the Creed of Nicaea. In 381 this creed was modified by the First Council of Constantinople. It contains what is, to me, a very interesting phrase. "We look for the resurrection."

We are not to look for it somewhere off out there but here and now. Resurrection is to be found in what Jesus referred to as "The Kingdom or Rule or Empire of God." When Jesus used this phrase, he was referring to a particular level of human consciousness and not a place to which people are destined to go after death.

The Kingdom of God refers to a lack of separation between whatever we mean when we use the word "God" - I try to use the phrase "Sacred Mystery - and ourselves. It also means a lack of separations between humans. This is what it means to love the neighbor.

To mistake resurrection living or the Kingdom of God for something other than here and now can throw our spirituality off and onto the wrong track for the rest of our lives.

Recently, it seems, there has been a spate of books about the afterlife. Mitch Albom, who has written several books with the same theme, wrote a best-seller, "The Five People You Meet in Heaven." And, more recently Lynn Vincent wrote of Todd Burpo's alleged experience of going to heaven and coming back.

You have all heard of people who have had "near death experiences." These are people who have almost died and then recovered and they tell of hearing music, seeing white light, having people - Jesus or people they know - coming to greet them. My mother had such an experience.

I think these books are interesting experiences in active imagination. The scientific community is divided about near death experiences. There is nothing wrong with either of these things but they mislead people into believing that this "after-death" heaven is what Jesus dedicated almost all of his teaching to tell people about. It is not.

The single most important thing that Jesus taught about the Kingdom of Heaven is that it is within and that our spiritual work is to seek for it and inhabit it.

That is what I invite you to do. To go out and live this holy script and look for resurrection. I do so by telling you a story.

The story is in a book by Peter Mattheissen titled "The Snow Leopard." The book was first published in 1978. That's a long time ago. What I remember about 1978 is that it was perhaps the worst year of my life. Perhaps that is why Mattheissen's story stands out for me so.

The book is about Mattheissen's own journey, undertaken just five years earlier, in 1973. He and a colleague

travelled high into the remote mountains near Tibet to study the Himalayan blue sheep and possibly glimpse the rare and beautiful Himalayan snow leopard.

As the story unfolds it becomes clear that Matthiessen, a student of Zen Buddhism, is also on a spiritual quest. We find out that his wife had recently died of cancer and though it was a painful decision to make, he had left his small son behind in America. This is how important it was to him to be able to spot the rare snow leopard.

It is a difficult journey. Expensive in many ways. The book charts his inner path as well as the outer one and brings to the reader a deepening understanding of reality, suffering, impermanence and beauty.

All along Mattheissen's journey - one that required great discipline, suffering and hardship - he heard reports of sightings of the snow leopard here and there. Sometimes he missed the snow leopard only by a few hours. Finally he returns home. When asked by others, "Did you see the snow leopard?" he replies, "No - isn't that wonderful?"

He didn't get what he wanted, it didn't turn out the way he planned, he was not successful nor was he in control of the outcome and, afterwards, he says, "Isn't that wonderful?"

How do we do this looking for resurrection? By practicing, as did Jesus, the limitless qualities of love, compassion, non-violence, justice and inclusiveness. We work at trying to see the world as he did, by living lives as if God really ran the show.

Maybe in the process of this looking we will realize that all our efforts to hang on, to be in control, to

succeed, to be right fail us utterly. What doesn't fail, if we are willing to trust it, is the dawning-in-the-dark realization that we are held on to by the love of Sacred Mystery. That's resurrection.

Isn't that wonderful?

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.