

RESURRECTION STORIES
Randall Tremba
April 12, 2015
Second Sunday of Easter
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Here's a little resurrection story for you.

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

Wait! Did I read that right?

No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.

Well, that was right. *Everything they owned was held in common.* You might think that's from the gospel according to Karl Marx? But it's not. It's from the Bible. Specifically, *The Acts of the Apostles* (4:32-35). It comes right after the four Gospels.

Evidently the Resurrection of Jesus empowered people to imagine new possibilities, including new social, political and economic arrangements. The Resurrection isn't, after all, just another telling of the cycles of nature, of life out of death, of seasons following seasons, spring following winter. That—along with evolution—is a grand and glorious story and should be told and celebrated over and over.

The Resurrection is a different type of story. It's about human choices and consequences. It's not about what we commonly call *life after death*; it's about a certain way of living *before death*. Nearly everyone believed in some kind of *life after death* for thousands of years before the Resurrection of Jesus. You don't need the Resurrection to convince people of that. But you might need the Resurrection to give you courage to live a certain way.

Here's another Resurrection story. This one is from the gospel of John. (20:19-31).

As the story goes, the disciple Thomas missed the first appearance of the resurrected Jesus. He heard about it from the others and said: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand on his wounded side, I will not believe."

(Thomas, like most of us, was from Missouri—the "show me" state.)

A week later the disciples were together. Thomas was with them. The doors were shut when Jesus suddenly stood among them. "Peace be with you," he said to them all.

And to Thomas he said, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

Thomas answered, "My Lord and my God!"

Have you believed because you have seen me, Thomas? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

And then comes this coda to the story.

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

Here are three stories of the “living Christ” not written in the book from which I’ve just read.

Martin Luther King was assassinated on April 4, 1968. The news shocked the world including a young pastor serving a church in Essex, 30 miles east of London. Brian Wren, the pastor, was also a fledgling hymn writer. He would go on to compose 300 some hymns.

In the aftershock of King’s assassination Brian composed a hymn for his congregation to sing that Easter Sunday 1968 just 10 days after King’s murder. Here’s the first verse.

*Christ is alive! Let Christians sing.
The cross stands empty to the sky.
Let streets and homes with praises ring.
Love, drowned in death, shall never die.*

The death of Martin Luther King in 1968, did not kill the civil rights movement. Its spirit is still embodied in people and movements in this nation and all around the world. His death, like the death of Gandhi, 20 years before, breathed new life into the world.

It doesn’t matter how many lynching trees, crosses, spears, bullets, or drones an empire has, it cannot kill a people’s longing to be free. Love shall be vindicated. And that’s one meaning of the Resurrection of Jesus.

Love, drowned in death, shall never die.

One year before his assassination, on April 4, 1967, King spoke out publicly for the first time against the war in Vietnam. It incensed President Lyndon Johnson so much he immediately revoked King’s invitation to the White House. To which King replied: “The calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision—but we must speak.”

Be not afraid. I am with you. You are my body.

In April 1969, one year after King’s death, Brian Willson, a US Air Force captain, was counting dead bodies in a South Vietnamese village following a bombing and napalm raid. Brian had been born on the fourth of July 1941. And it showed.

He had been an enthusiastic supporter of the war in Vietnam, even writing a letter to the President while in high school urging him to nuke the Vietnamese communist. Brian was raised a devout Baptist and at one point contemplated the ministry. But the Christian creed would eventually lose credibility and legitimacy for him.

In 1966, he enlisted in the US Air Force. Three years later, while counting those dead bodies, something happened. Brian looked into the open eyes of a dead mother with three dead children nearby. As he would tell it later and often, there and then he had an epiphany. He couldn’t breathe. And then something breathed in him.

This is not your enemy, a voice said. This is your family.

Brian would devote the rest of his life trying to save victims of violence by non-violent means, in the way and in the spirit of Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, Mother Maria of Paris, Gandhi and Jesus. Although none of that was in his head at the time.

Upon returning to the United States, he completed a law degree and took up work to alleviate the conditions of prisoners. One thing led to another including an experiment in living like an Amish on his small dairy farm in upstate New York. Eventually, he found himself nearly broke.

And then, in the 1980s as part of a Vets for Peace team, he visited Nicaragua and El Salvador, nations torn by bloody conflict and war. He witnessed death and brutality inflicted in large part with weapons and training provided by his own nation's government.

He remembered Vietnam and the mother with three dead children. *These are my family. My life is not worth more; theirs is not worth less.* Over and over he would say it. *This is my family. We are one.*

And so it was on Sept. 1, 1987, Brian sat down to stop a train full of munitions bound for Central America. With fellow vets standing along side, he sat on the tracks leading out of the Concord California Naval Weapons Station.

The protest was, as Daniel Ellsberg said, a form of theater. No one expected a human body to actually stop a train. These non-violent actions were intended to get media attention and thus alert an uninformed and indifferent public about covert and illegal US policy.

By previous agreement with navy officials, the slow moving train would stop, arrests would be made, jail time would be served. But on that particular day the train did not stop. It deliberately sped up, dragging Brian underneath the locomotive, slicing off both legs and a chunk of his skull.

He survived—barely. And to this day, 28 years later, he continues to stand up against greed, injustice and violence.

You can read his story in his memoir, *Blood on the Tracks*, including his poignant lament of another time and another place where good and decent people, minding their own business, did not bother to sit on tracks while trains full of Jews rolled on to gas chambers.

Love, drowned in death, will never die.

Malala Yousafzai was not raised a Baptist or a Christian. Malala is a Muslim. She saw the suffering of her sisters, suffering from an unjust social and political system. She determined to save them. And for that she was shot by the Taliban and nearly died.

She survived—barely. And to this day she continues working to bring justice, hope and education to girls in Pakistan and beyond.

And that is a Resurrection story—the power to imagine and live fearlessly into a new world—the world at large or the small world that is your home, your neighborhood, your nation, your life.

Be not afraid. I am with you. You are my body.

The Resurrection of Jesus is, of course, unbelievable. It's absolutely unbelievable until you believe it or start living like it is.

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Christ is alive! Let Christians sing.
The cross stands empty to the sky.
Let streets and homes with praises ring.
Love, drowned in death, shall never die.

Christ is alive! No longer bound
to distant years in Palestine,
but saving, healing, here and now,
and touching every place and time.

Not throned above, remotely high,
untouched, unmoved by human pains,
but daily, in the midst of life,
our Savior with the Father reigns.

In every insult, rift, and war
where color, scorn or wealth divide,
Christ suffers still, yet loves the more,
and lives, where even hope has died.

Women and men, in age and youth,
can feel the Spirit, hear the call,
and find the way, the life, the truth,
revealed in Jesus, freed for all.

Christ is alive, and comes to bring
good news to this and every age,
till earth and sky and ocean ring
with joy, with justice, love, and praise.

Brian Wren