

*Based on Luke 24:1-11. The Apostles Struggle with The Resurrection.*

As I reflect on the meaning of resurrection this particular Easter Sunday 2022, I think of my now-deceased grandmother, who spent her entire life immersed in the world of science. Grandma was one of the first women to graduate from the University of Michigan with a degree in botany. She was the daughter of a scientist, the spouse of a scientist, and the mother of three *women* scientists. Grandma's entire way of approaching life, including her Christian faith, was grounded in her scientific, rational view of the natural world.

Growing up, Grandma was the person I would talk to about all of the things I thought the Church was telling me I had to believe, literally, but that I really struggled with—like this whole resurrection business. According to official Church teaching about resurrection, not only does God raise Jesus from the dead two thousand years ago, as we learn from the men in dazzling clothes in our Lesson from Luke this morning, but God will also, at the end of time, resurrect the bodies of all the rest of us, and then reunite our bodies with our souls in a new heaven and a new earth where we will live forever in adoration of that same God. Not unlike this vision of Paradise taking center stage in our sanctuary this morning.

It turns out this broader teaching about resurrection has been fundamental to the Christian tradition since its inception, although you will not hear much preaching in this direction among progressive Presbyterians. That is because, as recent surveys have indicated, a large majority of American Christians—including many of us gathered here at SPC this morning—like the earliest disciples in Luke's Gospel Lesson today, do not actually believe this whole resurrection business. Too much like *The Walking Dead* zombie apocalypse for us!

In the Bible belt world of my adolescence, however, many believers turned cartwheels to make literal sense of this teaching. They wondered whether our resurrected bodies would be young or old, if we would get our tonsils back, whether or not we would still need glasses. (I wouldn't mind some Holy Ghost non-invasive liposuction, myself!) But few people in my Bible belt upbringing dared challenge the doctrine altogether. Some things you just did not question. Not unless you were willing to sacrifice your entire faith and leave the tradition altogether.

My science-loving Grandma was different. *God is limited by God's creation*, she defiantly declared, contradicting the tradition's core teaching at every turn, while staying devotedly committed to that same tradition. Grandma ridiculed any suggestion that her faith would come crumbling apart in admitting that she just did not believe this whole resurrection business. *I am just too much of a scientist*, Grandma would say. *When I die, I'm in God's hands. And I'm content with that.*

Turns out a sizable group of faithful followers in the early church sided with my Grandma, some of them blatantly, at least at first, as in our Lesson today, some of them more subtly, if you read between the lines in the letters of Paul, especially to the Corinthians.

Why is it so important to the two men in dazzling clothes in our Lesson from Luke today and the apostle Paul in his letters to convince the faithful otherwise? Is it not, after all, just a brainless pious escape - a seemingly idle tale - to focus so much on this resurrection business? Wasn't the actual ministry of the life of Jesus enough?

Isn't the point to live as he taught us to live? Would it not be better just to forget all that resurrection nonsense and focus on the real work of justice and healing that still needs to be done?

With all due respect to the disciples who do not believe—and especially to my Grandma!—I am starting to think that it really does matter what we believe about our final destiny, both as individuals and as a cosmos. Not because it is an escape from the here-and-now. Not because it lets us off the hook on how to live in justice and peace today. But because what we believe about our final destiny, both as individuals and as a cosmos, puts the here-and-now into perspective.

It matters because we need to trust that our personal lives will not vanish without a trace into the void, even if we cannot make rational sense of how resurrection will happen. It matters because we need to trust that somewhere, somehow swords will be permanently beaten into ploughshares and the lion will indeed lie down with the lamb, even if that peaceable kingdom seems so incredibly far away.

It matters because we need to trust that our bodies matter to God just as much as our spirits do and that our earth matters to God just as much as heaven does, and that our human striving and achieving, our struggles and hardships, our justice-seeking and our peacemaking have a meaning that is ensured by God's providence, and that it will last beyond our own short time on this planet. As the saying goes, *faith without works is dead, but works without faith is just too hard.*

Like my Grandma, we do not need to know the dimensions of heaven or the social arrangements of the kingdom. All we really require is the assurance that our future—and our present!—rests in God's loving and resurrecting hands.

Speaking of Grandma, she shifted her worldview in some fundamental ways in the last decade of her life, even though she still loved science. Every week seemed to bring another funeral of someone she had come to know and love in her retirement community. When I visited Grandma after my first year of divinity school, knee deep in all of the teaching of the tradition about the doctrine of resurrection, Grandma confessed that she had changed her mind about it all.

*I have been putting too many limits on God,* she said, as our conversation turned to theology. *I have been saying all my life that there's no such thing as resurrection. But I don't really know that. Who am I to limit God according to my own limitations? Who am I to think I know what the future cannot possibly hold? When it comes to resurrection,* Grandma said, *I am starting to think, 'Why not?'*

*Why not?* Grandma said. That is such a great theological conviction. *Why not?!* It is, in fact, simply brilliant. I would put my science-loving Grandma's reasoning in line with any systematic theologian or biblical studies professor any time anywhere. When it comes to the fundamental convictions of our faith, *Why not?!*

Why not trust in God's resurrecting power to give us hope for the future and strength for the present? Why not live into the hope that God is working overtime for all time to make all things right in this world and the next?

Why not trust that God can heal and restore and forgive and liberate our planet and our selves, no matter how much we seem to have messed things up beyond all fixing? Why not celebrate that every part of who we are—body and soul and heart and mind—*matters* to God and will be redeemed for eternity? Why not believe it can happen now through us and with us and for us, as well as in the life to come?

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