

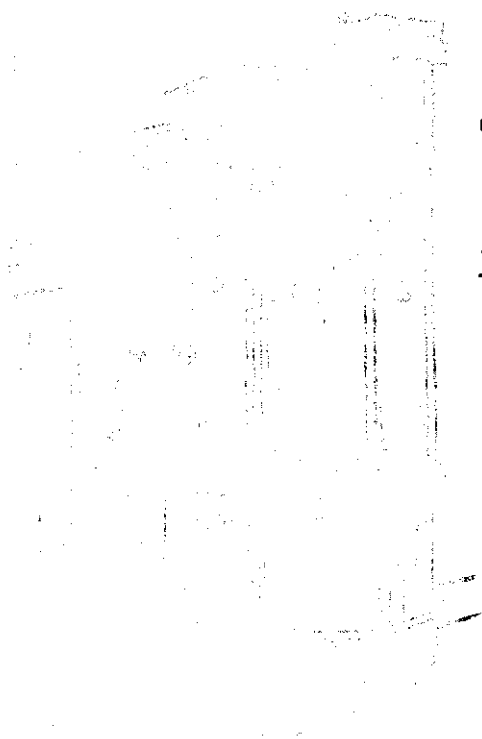
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The Southminster Pulpit

"THE MIRACLE OF RESURRECTION IN THIS LIFE AND THE NEXT"

Text: "He said to them: "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead."
Luke 16:31



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This parable is a marvelous story. It takes you by the hand this Easter Morning and walks you along the way of the Miracle of Resurrection in this life and the next. It tells of two men: one rich, the other poor. The first had a magnificent feast every day of his life; the other lived on some crumbs that fell from his table. In time, they both died. Angels, it says, carried the poor man straight to heaven, into the bosom of Abraham. The other went to hell; and, perishing, he cried for help from his poor old friend. Upon which Abraham answered that it was too late. So Dives, which is Latin for rich, asked permission then to inform his five brothers back on earth what had happened so they could change their ways; "Surely," he said, "if someone should come back from the dead, they would mend their ways." But, "No," said Abraham, "if they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead." End of story.

Now, don't get lost. Our question is not of wealth or poverty, heaven or hell. Dives failed to make the grade not because of what he did. It was what he did not do with what he had. I read in the Autobiography that Albert Schweitzer went out to Africa when he finally understood this parable. His whole world and new life began when he saw a vision that aching Africa was the Lazarus in the story, and he, a kind of Dives. And the two were brought together at Lamberene. That, also, is a great story, but not for us this morning.

Today we focus on the verse which ends the parable, where it says that if Dives and his kin are not convinced by Moses and the prophets - by the truth of all the Scripture, they would not be impressed if someone should come back from the

dead. All the proof we need for matters of the spirit, it says, is all around us, plentiful enough already in the here and now. Resurrection has to do with everlasting life, but it hits the day by day and year by year terrain with equal certitude.

What that means, my friends, is this: other things than life itself grow old and die; other things are known to perish all along the way. They, too, need resurrection. Hope grows old if you permit it; and even love can die. Enthusiasm grays and wanes; marriages get ancient and go tottering along. Our moral standards, too, get old and feeble, too weak to carry on; so do the warp and woof of all the goals we started out to seek. And the lovely gift of keen appreciation for the beauty of the universe can be given back. We all forget to sing our Easter songs on Monday, and our fires to change the world for justice go flickering out and stop. Life takes its sudden, downward turns. The spark that flies from that ancient little prayer cantouch and stop us all: "O Lord, keep me alive while I am still living." That's my deepest need and yours as well. The other life which lies beyond our certitude is still a sacred hope and mystery; the blinding glory of what heaven is, is not our business just yet; that belongs to God alone.

Why fret and worry over what we cannot comprehend or change. Eye still hath not seen, nor ear heard what the Lord has prepared for us there - not yet. (Even that past master of the sentimental way, old Alfred Tennyson, declared that if his In Memoriam friend came back to visit him, he would be afraid that he had lost his mind completely and was having visions - and would make him go away again. If sound and sense cannot convince us, then another miracle would not.) Life is the gift we celebrate.

This living of these days is what I need to have ennobled and renewed; this life, too, needs resurrection every passing day, from all that plagues the body, and all that can perplex the soul. And to that now, we turn in earnest.

Easter is our festival supreme, but for most it doesn't last, if it comes at all. One towering reason why it fades is that we make the miracle a future or a past event, which must be authenticated by our reasoning. We make it either a subject for what happens when we die, or what happened when the stone was rolled away. In both, we usually look perplexed. What resurrection really means in this life and the next is that God's creative power can raise up something new. We do not really need to argue what the Resurrection was, or what our private resurrection will be. We need to seek to have our daily lives raised up to something new; to take the parts which have broken off or died and let it all be born again in the lovely way of Christ himself.

Professor H. A. Williams said that the problem takes on a special character when we come to the resurrection of the body. We need to open up ourselves to have the dualism of the mind and body syndrome banished from our lives. We need a miracle, not a formula or prescription, to end the problems of the soul. We need to love ourselves and allow that self to be renewed.

The beast within us rages, the lion often rules the lamb. But the least that we can do is to unplug our ears to hear the voice of the Eternal Word in the things which turn us upside down and inside out. We must be alert to ourselves, alert for change and newness, whatever age we are, and

if we are thus seeking, we have begun to find. We need to kiss the joy as it flies, and not to try to bind it to ourselves.

We are afraid, Dr. Williams says, because our bodies are so weak and fragile, and we are terrified inside when we finally realize that one day we, too, will grow old and die. And then the world goes on as usual, and we deny ourselves the abundant life Christ promises us already, and we play the game.

Yet, we do not need to wait for our eternal self - it's already here; and if it needs the blood which courses through its veins and oxygen to give it real existence - so what; it's the life we have, a gift of God. What's more, the miracle of our being given life beyond the grave is no greater than the miracle of continually being given life right here. That's what the symbol of the resurrection really means. It is always the calling into being of what is non-existent, and what greater miracle could ever be brought forward to match the miracle of the universe itself and life within it - out of nothing the entire world was made; life came into cosmic dust! What can you produce that will match the power of the foundations of the world?

Even solitary, old Thoreau once said up in Walden, "Only that day dawns to which you are awake." I talked with a man in Kirkcaldy one day who worked down in the mines during World War II. He said for one period there he was never out of the pits for over three full weeks, so busy unburying the precious product to warm the homes and keep the fires of freedom burning over Britain. He said he never saw the dawn through late winter

and into spring; trundling out with dark at dawn, a cat nap here and there two miles down, and coming home by dark at dusk. But then, he said, "My Easter Sunday morning came, and, oh, the beauty of the shining sun and the lively thrill. And now I think about it often; I never will forget my Easter." When one day from the dark and grime and murky deep, from underneath the earth and all which presses in upon your sagging spirits, when you don't know where to turn, I tell you, friend, you need an Easter morning! Hey, you really do. You need this miracle of resurrection - to see the sun of all your hopes can be, not someday sad and far off down the coming years; you need a Resurrection morning now!

What's more, it's here for you to take. I see it everywhere I go. Time after time, if we allow it, as we roam around the world we know and see, there is a lovely touch of resurrection, here and there and even everywhere. The world is full of the rhythm of returning spring, and the quintessential newness that we celebrate in Christ is always waiting just around the corner. I see it in the eyes of little children, and in the reminiscence of the oldest man I know, and in the people in the pews. You know I get my strength from you, can feel it welling up from the support and prayers you give.

When a Church has stumbled through the doldrums of a petty discontent, with Christian people taking sides against their fellow Christians in the incidental appendages to the message of the Gospel; ah, when that Church forgets its pet harangues and lives again to kiss the fleeting joy, and when the newness of God's love comes wandering into the most crowded pew of all and wiggles down

between two highly different worshippers and joins their hands as one; and when the Spirit gathers others in and adds their hands as well; and when the powerful wind of the living Christ blows all that discontent away; ah, then, my friend, you have a resurrection!

Or when the man, who once was tied to trivia, who got buried under all the accumulated debris from his past, and present, too, when he realizes his situation and knows it is less than he would choose to be, when he finds the humor in how ridiculous he is - or was - and learns to laugh about it, ah, even just in laughter, he is raised above it all; and there, my friend, you have a resurrection.

Or when we're faced with grief of any sort, the grief of being jilted by the one we love, or the grief of broken marriages when hopes had once been raised so high, or the grief of a bewildered widow's sagging spirit, devoted to her husband for all those forty years - or was it only four - and then he's gone, and her life too, so intertwined, goes with him. Well, then, when she begins to find her place again, when from the darkened mine of grief she lifts up her head to see the rising sun, when the sparkle breaks through the very gloom, ah, then and there, my friend, you have a resurrection!

Or when a whole minority people, black, Chicano, Indian, or a nationality group breaks the bindings of the past, and learns to find its pride and sacred past and contribution and new strength; when a decade torn with strife comes and goes away forever; when black is really beautiful - that, my friend, is resurrection.

And in illness, too. As famous Bobby Jones once said to that reporter shortly after his crippling illness was diagnosed for good, twenty years before he died, and knowing he faced debilitation that would one day take his life, "Yes, it's really very bad, and it will not get much better. But I've learned in golf to play the ball as it lies. So let's just play it and talk no more about it." And down the heartbreak of all those many years, he never did. So when tragic illness strikes a man of hearty courage, and he enfolds that suffering to his breast in silence and takes all the terror, but learns to live whatever's left in spite of it; then and there, in life as well as death, you have a miracle of resurrection.

And, for our nation with its sagging spirits and aching hearts for all that's slipped, pining to return to what was good, and do-gooders win the day and rule the land with pious platitudes and pointing fingers; well, when they finally go away, and when the darkness lifts, and all the doomsday rants are put back up on the highest shelf, then, my friend, we will go forward and we will have another resurrection.

I have this fundamental belief, said Franz Josef Strauss just the other day, that the future of America is indispensable to the future of the world. And were I not capable of believing that the future of America is sound, I would migrate to another planet and affix Dante's Inferno greeting at the door:
Abandon hope, all ye who enter here!

But you needn't feel abandon. The resiliency is there, as is the power to work wonders, right with-

in ourselves; and when we find it, then we will have a resurrection!

To you, the question is not whether there is resurrection, but whether you, in all you are and try to be, whether you have opened up the shades and know it is morning and let the sunlight in. The question is not whether there is resurrection: of course there is! The question is whether you have allowed yourself to see it, and be it, and love it and live it and, who knows, even sing about it.

In the Bible, from the first page where the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the deep, darkness was becoming light. And the last page promises that there will be no need of candles or the light of the sun - "Oh Bright and Morning Star." And all the inbetween, the Spirit of God is there to hold our human life and history tenderly together. Never does He cease.

Tournier says somewhere that to live the Christian life and take the risks that the living will require is to be likened to a neophyte performer swinging from a trapeze bar high above the circus floor; and, worse, at the apex of the swing to let go and jump with the hope, or even confidence, that the Lord of all your being will swing another one to meet you just in the nick of time. Wow! That's scary, but it hints of what it really means to live in faith and trust.

We cannot be certain, not now, and sad if you pine for it, not ever! The fresh new wind of the Spirit still blows when and where it listeth, but you can usually feel it passing by unless you're sheltered too completely by your home-made world.

And that's your choice as well. Circumstances do not make you what you are. Events can buffet and assail you, and now and then the unknown knocks you down. But resurrection comes again and reaches out to help you up, to brush off the smarting knees and bruises as you limp along until the newness lifts you up and off the ground, bound away to be walking tall again. I know it's true, and so should you.

In the dark nights of your worried soul, when you wonder why you've been to where you were and where you're going next, take courage. For you never know what God may yet make of your life and hopes. The one thing you must never say is that the course is fixed or finished. Never allow yourself to say it, unless, as James Stuart once said, you want to make God out a liar.

And so the shadows fall apart,
and so the west winds play
But all the windows of my heart
I open to Thy day.

For He is working still, every time you think about it. He still holds out great prospects for your resurrection in this life and the next. The miracle of this life is as great as the miracle of the next. The slates are brushed off every night and washed, and erasers dusted out behind the doors every night - every morning new! If you allow it.

The blessed dead are gone; most surely they are with the Lord. But the Lord is with us too, well within the time and space we occupy. We do not go away to meet another God - most surely not. It is one God we worship of the Living and the Dead. He is no more there than here. The limita-

tion of our vision is the problem. Our days on earth are but a shadow. We all must perish. But as they live on in the house of the Lord, so, in fact, do we.

If in this life we know that each day is lived in the grace of God and that the surprising love of Christ is our cornerstone, then it will not seem strange that life should continue beyond the boundary of death. If the impossible occurred in the beginning, and from nothing the stuff of life was made; and in all those sacred moments where out of nothing hope was made for us, then why not say that we are no less helpless when we die. If we are resurrected all along the way, then at least we have the hint of what Christ promises here, as well as there. It's up to you to take it. "In every wink of an eye, some new grace is born."

So be open now, my friend, aware of the resurrected moments. Your problem or your question is not to scrutinize the Resurrection story of 2000 years ago, but the story which you have to tell. "God is not dead," Harvey Cox once said, "He's only silent, waiting patiently to hear your story." And that brings us back to Schweitzer and the marvelous life he lived. In Lamberene now, eight years past his death, every night at 6 o'clock the lamps are lighted in his study, and every night at midnight they are put out again. And every native up and down the village trails knows for certain that Schweitzer's there, just as surely as he ever was before. He's surely changed, but there - alive though dead. The mind of God can comprehend it, even if we can't. We try to know too much.

Can you say it, and mean it now: the Easter story started in a lovely garden; it ends with you and me. We need the miracle of resurrection, the gift of life we find in Christ, for now and ever more.

The strife is o'er
The battle done
The Victory of Life is won
The Song of Triumph has begun.
Alleluia. Amen.

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sermon has been printed for
our members and friends.

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