

“Resurrection: Not Resuscitation”

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One of the greatest speeches ever given was, of course, Martin Luther King Jr’s speech, “I have a Dream.” It spoke of hope and life and a future; but just think if he had said something just a little different, just changed the tense, “I had a Dream.” In that one little change, that one little twist, we went from hope and transformation to despair and emptiness.

Too many churches are saying it with the wrong tense: I had a Dream; I had a Dream that we could be like we were in the 1950s; I had a Dream when churches were all full and people were all excited and there was opportunity. They had a Dream.

We need to honor and recognize that the resurrection isn’t just today; it’s every day of the year. “This is the day the Lord has made,” as Chris read. This is the day in which we recognize that God is continuing to make change in the present and future tense, not in the past. We have so many things we are looking forward to and I don’t blame anyone, because even the Disciples were having a dream so many years ago in the darkness of the moment before they saw the tomb empty. They sat there moping because they had witnessed the crucifixion, but they could not even contemplate a resurrection.

These two boneheads, Peter and John, ran a race to see who could get to the tomb first. They got there and looked inside - it’s empty. They put two and two together and got five, and then they walked on home.

It was Mary. Mary was the one. The angels didn’t appear at the tomb to the popular Apostles. No, the angels appeared to a humble woman. Two thousand years ago being a woman didn’t make you special. Yet it was she to whom the angels spoke. They picked the weakest and most humble among them and offered themselves to her. She went back and shared, and then over time they got it.

They didn’t want the change, they wanted the resuscitation. If Jesus had just been resuscitated - he didn’t quite die - and they got him back, nothing would have changed. They just would have said, “Oh my goodness, you are alive. Let’s get back to what we were doing.” But no, they had to witness the resurrection of Jesus, dead for three long days. They couldn’t go back to what they were doing. They had to accept that change and move forward in faith. Things could never be the same again. The entire universe, the entire cosmos was changed and put on its ear by a Jesus who changed the rule and made life something eternal for all of us.

I’m thinking to myself and its Wednesday of this past week: “How am I going to explain that in such a way that they will hear it that way all of the time? Every year we have an Easter. How am I going to do it new?” It is Wednesday evening and the Christian Education Unit, on top of everything else I had to do this week, said “Could you come in and meet with all of the kids and youth on Wednesday night - the last 242 before Easter - and explain the Easter message to them? And I thought, “Yes, I have plenty of time to do that.”

So I go in, with such a wonderful attitude too, and meet with the kids. We have dinner like we do every week. I was harassed by the kitchen staff and cook because they try to put cauliflower in everything, and I don't like it. I mean, by the time I met with the first group I was up to my neck with cauliflower and bad ideas.

I walk in and the first group, this Christian Education unit who is supposed to extol the virtues of Jesus Christ, put me in with nothing but middle school kids. That is evil.

So I walk into the room and Kellie Johnson gave me this wonderful film clip that I could use with them. It was so powerful. It was actually a clip from a foreign movie so none of the kids or I had seen it before. We put it up on the screen and we played it. It was so powerful and moving. It was a bit horrifying actually. The clip was about a father who was in charge of a drawbridge, so the ships could go through the channel and when it was lowered, trains could go across.

One day the father just happened to bring his 8-year-old son with him. The boy is playing by himself. A boat is there so the father lifts up the bridge, but the dad's job was so boring, that the little boy didn't want to sit up there. (He was catching frogs and having a good time.)

Because the boy had an angle the father didn't quite have, he could see smoke coming up, and knew a train was coming. The boat wasn't quite through so the drawbridge is still up. The boy is trying to wave to his dad. His dad doesn't see him because his dad is dealing with the drawbridge being up.

Suddenly the boy takes it upon himself to go to the manual lever, which is all the way down by the shore line right in front of the tracks. He pulls up the planks to get to the red lever that will allow him to manually lower the bridge. The dad sees the son just lying there with just his legs sticking out. He yells, "I know what I'm doing. Just get out of the way." Just then the boy falls onto the bridge, right into the gears. The father starts screaming, "What am I going to do?" If he lowers the bridge the boy will be crushed! If he doesn't lower the bridge that train that is coming – a passenger train, with hundreds of people aboard - will crash.

The kids are watching this and trying to understand what it all means.

All of a sudden, in one last tearful scream, the father lowers the bridge; the train goes across, the father, screaming, goes down to the tracks but there is nothing he can do. Everybody on the train is visiting with their friends or family, totally unaware of what had just happened.

These middle-school kids - who I like to holler at just on principal every day that I can - sat there and talked about how God must have felt like the father when the son fell into the tracks. He had to choose between all of the people or his son, and gave his son so that all of those people could be resurrected. The kids got it.

They talked about other ways in which that could happen. They talked about what if the father had not been a person of faith and believed in life eternal. Would he have allowed

the others to die because he wanted to see his son one more time? Did it matter that he would see his son and be reunited in God's heavenly kingdom, and did that allow him to drop that bridge?

The conversation went on and I was awed. They gave me the resurrection.

So I'm wiped out by the time I get to the preschool through 1st grade class. I'm telling them the Easter story, reading it from a book with wonderful pictures, and I realize when we are done that we have a few more minutes. That is a very frightening thing with preschoolers and 1st graders. So I asked them, "Have you known anyone that has died?" One mentioned a father, another mentioned an uncle or aunt or cousin; they all had somebody that they mourned.

Now, if you don't think that preschoolers through 1st graders should take Communion, then you should have been there to visit with them, because they had something they needed to be healed for. They talked about the resurrection and about what Heaven was. Then they asked about what it was like to die. They were like ghosts. Now, all of a sudden, I have preschoolers and I'm talking about a bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. I, of course, do what all ministers do: I quoted the Apostolic Fathers to them. But I was profoundly impressed by the depth of their humble but powerful commitment to the same emotions and feelings, and the need to hear the resurrection story, just like everyone else.

Now, I walk into the second through fifth grade class. I have the book and I'm worried that it is a little too simplistic. The pictures are really cute. We are reading through it, and then they start talking about my sermon from last week.

First of all I'm amazed they listened. Then I remembered I had them in the first three rows, and I pointed at them. They had to listen. They talked about pushing the button and if you were not here, we talked about authority figures. I had asked the question, "How in the world did the people who said, 'Hosanna,' on Sunday yell, 'Crucify,' on Friday?" I talked about an experiment of how people would shock someone until the point that it was almost deadly, just because an authority figure leaned over them and told them to push the button.

So they were talking about pushing the button. They said this world was like pushing the button. Bad things happen in this world. Then they started talking about what Heaven was like. They said what we think it's like, and what it will be like after the resurrection, is that no one is going to push the button. Everyone will love each other. We won't have to worry about police and other things. It will be great.

They had a vision that was every bit as good as John had in the book of Revelation chapter 21, where he said *"I saw a new Heaven and a new earth; for the first Heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I, John, saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'behold the Tabernacle of God is with humanity. And I will be their God and they shall be my people and I shall wipe the last tear from their eyes, and death will be no more; neither mourning nor crying nor pain, for the former things have passed away.'"*

They didn't quote it the same way I did, but they understood it, and they are living it. I learned the resurrection and I wanted you to learn the resurrection - not from me, one more way that I have done it - but from them. That is what you do when you come here on a Sunday morning, when you give your tithes, when you come on a Wednesday night and have dinner with them; you have offered them a glimpse somehow and in some ways more powerful than our own - of the resurrection and of life eternal.

It reminded me that transformative change, a dream, not that I have had, but a future hope lived out in a woman that I learned about, not long ago, in a book that I was reading, named Rev. Kelly Clem. Now, Rev. Clem was the pastor of a small United Methodist Church in Piedmont, Alabama. On Palm Sunday 1994, they were getting ready for worship - getting ready for the Holy Week. She was stressed out about everything, - like I was last Wednesday evening. (Every pastor has this stress during Holy Week.) She had two daughters, one named Sarah, who was 2 years old, and another named Hannah, who was 4 years old. She made sure that her husband took Sarah to the nursery and meanwhile she is taking care of the little urchins sitting in the front two rows who were going to sing - the little preschool through first grade group. They were so cute in their little white and blue robes. They had been practicing their singing and she was getting ready to read the Scripture and proclaim the message, when all of a sudden there was a boom. Everyone turned to look and - as fast as they turned - there was another whoosh and all of the windows blew in.

All she remembers was hearing someone yell, "Tornado!" and her world turned dark, as she dove for her daughter, Hannah. She couldn't really even, to this day, describe whether she had been out for three seconds or three minutes, but all of a sudden she opened her eyes and there was dust everywhere. She remembers hearing, "The nursery is OK. It is still standing."

Then it registered. She turned and looked for her daughter, Hannah, and that whole wall was on top of her. You could see bits of white and blue. They all ran over and dug the kids out, and Hannah was gone. Imagine Holy Week with 20 children and adults dead, and 90 more injured.

That whole week she was bandaged up because she hurt her shoulder and her head. She gave funeral after funeral. She had been in all of the different funeral homes and churches, because theirs was gone. She did funeral after funeral, including her own daughter's.

Then Friday night, after all of it was done, she started getting phone calls. "Are having we having Easter this year?" She hadn't even thought about it. How do you preach Easter after the week they had?

But she got up on Easter morning and decided they were going to have a change in the United Methodist Church of Piedmont, Alabama. They didn't like the change, there were too many gone and too many injured - but they couldn't stay there. They had to change - hold onto death or grasp the resurrection.

With over 200 people standing on the lawn in front of bricks and mess, they did Easter. She started out with Romans chapter 8, the last few verses: *I'm convinced that neither death nor life nor anything in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is the Christ Jesus our Lord.* Then they sang the hymn that we sang at the opening of our service "Christ the Lord is Risen Today!" They prayed and they went on living their resurrected lives.

Kelly Clem and her husband, Dale, went on to be missionaries in Lithuania. They lost one daughter, Hannah, but they know she is resurrected and in the loving arms of God. Sarah was saved. Then they had another daughter, Laurel.

After years in Lithuania, they came back. Their two daughters are grown now and they serve churches in Huntsville, Alabama, and are worshiping with us today. Laurel did not replace Hannah, but they have three daughters now, who they celebrate and love.

That same year that they had the tornado, I was in Israel and I was taking Communion in the garden tomb. It didn't really impress me all that much. What impressed me the most was that it was empty. I went back to my congregation at the end of that week in Israel and said, "It's not about an empty tomb somewhere else. It's about filling hearts and lives here. The Spirit isn't in that tomb. That Spirit is in this room, where we fill the lives of children and youth and adults; where we offer the resurrection and we offer life so in those moments of death we can celebrate life eternal, and that is Easter.

In Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen