

**RESURRECTING SCRIPTURE**  
Randall Tremba  
April 19, 2015  
Third Sunday of Easter  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

**Luke 24:36b-48**

*While they were talking, Jesus himself stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought they were seeing a ghost.*

*"Why are you frightened? Why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see it is I myself. Touch me; a ghost does not have flesh and bones." And then he asked, "Have you anything to eat?"*

*They gave him a piece of broiled fish. He took it and ate it.*

*Then he said, "Remember the words I spoke to you while I was still with you. Everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms — that would be what we call the "Old Testament" — must be fulfilled."*

*Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things."*

And that, I should say, is a rather creative interpretation of scripture since those points about the Messiah suffering are not all that clear and certainly not neatly in one place. But then Jesus wasn't the first or last to see things in Scripture that others don't.

In fact, I wonder if these Resurrection stories might unwittingly be glimpses of yet another serendipitous surprise in the 4.5 billion year saga of evolution on this planet. Maybe the communal "Body of Christ" emerging around the planet, embodied in diverse movements of compassion and non-violence, is not just a metaphor. I don't know. I just wonder.

And in the meantime I wonder where Marian Buckner might be. This past Monday morning I stood by Marian as she lay upon her deathbed. Just the day before she'd been her spunky old self. Now she was completely unresponsive.

I offered a final blessing from her church family and told her she would soon see Hank, the love of her life, who had died suddenly nine years ago. I don't know if she'll see him. I hope so. But I have no proof. Only a few clues.

For one thing, it's hard to bet against the vast majority of the human race that believes and has believed for tens of thousands of years that something like that is true. No more sickness. No more pain. No more tears. No more dying. All the ones we have ever loved together again, feasting, drinking, singing and dancing. Not a care in the world. Paradise. Endless baseball. Well, that may be a stretch but since we don't know we are free to speculate and imagine.

Is there life after death? No one knows. But even without proof, it's hard to bet against a near consensus that there is.

And then there are the testimonies of a soothing light seen in many near death experiences. It doesn't prove anything. But it's a clue, a teaser to provoke imagination and speculation.

There are also a few inklings of paradise in our own scriptural tradition. But only a few.

In fact, compared to other ancient cultures our Jewish ancestors, including their scriptures, had little interest in the so called after life. For many Jews—past and present—their creed goes something like this: *God was at the beginning and that was good. God will be at the end and that will likely be good, too. But we don't know. So let's not worry and fret about things we can't know and do something about things we can. Let's do all we can to make this life, this world just, peaceable, free, beautiful, whole, wholesome, and holy.*

If that's the Jewish faith in a nutshell, I'm totally with that. As are a bunch of Buddhist and a whole lot of other religious and non-religious people including atheists. It's not that complicated really. Live fully in this life. Fret not about the next.

Still there are inklings in our scriptures. Psalm 23. *I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.* And then there's this from the gospel of John: *in my father's house are many mansions* which isn't really about heaven but sounds like it could be—an inkling of something beyond.

There's also the Book of Revelation with its visions of golden streets and crystal rivers in heaven but then that's the book of Revelation and that book is a cartoon, a kind of graphic novel and quite serious to be sure. It urges faithfulness to Christ despite the violent tyranny of the Roman Empire. Remember: *we take the Bible too seriously to take it literally.* You need to know what you're looking at or you could come to some very weird and hateful conclusions.

And then there's the Resurrection. Proof positive of the after life! Not really. The Resurrection, as it turns out, is very much about living here and now. These Resurrection stories or parables go out of their way to let us know that the risen Jesus—a real but baffling presence—is on earth; not up in heaven waiting for us to die and join him which is, I know, a very, very popular Christian notion.

Look at me, says the Risen One. I am here. Touch me. Give me something to eat.

And then, according to the gospel lesson for today, Jesus resurrected the ancient scriptures of his people just as we must do over and over. The dead letters of the Bible can live if we allow them out of their musty tombs.

Jesus connected his work, his mission, his life and death to the vision of the great ancestors as told in his—and now our—scriptures. Abraham and Sarah, Ruth and David, Esther and Ezekiel. It's a vision of peace and justice for all peoples and nations not by killing those who get in the way—as empires do—but by healing all along the way.

By the way, did you know that all the stories of the Resurrection were told and written by first century Jews? There wasn't a Christian as yet in sight. The stories of the Resurrection were first told by Jewish people and that's a key to understanding them.

The stories of the Resurrection may be seen as supporting an old argument put forward by our Jewish ancestors. It's only an argument. So we can argue back. Don't let "Thus saith the Lord" keep you from arguing back.

For example, when Jesus says: come and follow me, it's not an order; it's an invitation to a certain way of living on this earth. It's a hard way and we might not want to take it on now or ever. And that's OK. There's no condemnation. No threat of hell. If you don't or can't you are still dearly loved. Jesus knew not everyone could walk that way.

Still, the way of Jesus, we believe, leads to great joy and also great sacrifice. St. Francis, Gandhi, Mother Maria of Paris, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero, Malala and others have walked that way and say it is worth it. I know, I know, it's hard to believe, but that's what they say.

The argument from our ancestors has three points and goes something like this. First, this world and all therein began with an original blessing. (Genesis 1) Behold it and we are good. Don't ever believe we were born in sin or that the material world is evil.

Some churches preach that; we don't. We preach and teach original blessing. The world is good and so are you.

But, secondly, look around. Alas, it's not all good. Something's gone wrong. Cain killed Abel and we continue to kill and maim our own brothers and sisters. (Genesis 4) And look how the nations fear and seek to destroy the other. Who or what will save us from nationalism, tribalism, egoism and cycles of revenge? (Genesis 11)

That's the way the world is, so says this argument: blessed but messed up. Who or what can save us from this mess?

And, then, thirdly, just when you think the answer might be God, along comes this story of great human imagination, creativity and hope. Four thousand years ago, Abraham and Sarah had a hunch, a hunch that they could transcend tribalism and find a way to bless all families, tribes and nations of the whole world. (Genesis 12)

Well, that's easy to say and easy to dream. But tribalism is powerful and not just in the Middle East. It's in our nation as well.

Still, the dream was there in the heart of Abraham and Sarah. For a thousand years that dream and the people who dreamed it were crushed and broken by one empire after another. And then along came Ezekiel a Jewish prophet and poet. Five hundred years before Jesus, Ezekiel proclaimed a resurrection in words something like this.

*These dead dry bones that once held a dream of blessing all nations shall be resurrected and stand upright upon the earth. The resurrection of our people and our vision will happen someday.*

Many of the prophets believed that their defeated and despondent nation would rise up and destroy its oppressors. The messiah himself would lead the charge with sword in hand.

In other words, resurrection with vindication was a 500 year-old idea by the time Jesus arrived in the first century. Resurrection (mingled perhaps with insurrection) and bloody revenge was what many first century Jews had in mind when suddenly a particular Jewish young man who embodied pure compassion was crucified by the Empire without a fight and soon thereafter resurrected into the material world as if to say: *this world is good. It will not be forsaken. Suffering is not the end of the story. Suffering is part of the victory. Love, not hate, shall be the last word. We have work to do.*

Good Friday and Easter go together time and time again. You can't have one without the other. Suffering with the victims of society somehow, somehow leads to redemption. Who would have thought? The first witnesses were totally baffled.

Resurrection, as it turns out, is a process not a finished product. Like creation and evolution it takes time. Resurrection is an uprising of fearless love, a movement of compassion and non-violence of which we see inklings all around the world.

The Resurrection of Jesus is a beginning of an uprising of all people into the light and dance of the divine.

\* \* \*

**HYMN**  
Lord of the Dance