

ACTS 10:34-43

PSALM 118:1-2, 14-24

COLOSSIANS 3:1-4

MATTHEW 28:1-10

JOHN 20:1-18

Easter Day; Resurrection of the Lord

April 9, 2023; Year A

**(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)**

### ***Resurrecting Jesus! Resurrecting Us!***

Among his many books on killing various individuals, including presidents Abraham Lincoln and John Fitzgerald Kennedy, (*Killing Patton, Killing Reagan, Killing the Rising Sun, Killing England*) disgraced former news commentator Bill O'Reilly wrote a book called *Killing Jesus!* In his preface, a beginning note to readers, he astutely declares "To say that Jesus of Nazareth was the most influential man who ever lived is almost trite. Nearly two thousand years after he was brutally executed by Roman soldiers, more than 2.2 billion human beings attempt to follow his teachings . . . That includes 77 percent of the U.S. population, according to a Gallup Poll. The teachings of Jesus have shaped the entire world and continue to do so."<sup>1</sup> Well said, no matter one's personal opinion about O'Reilly. I must confess that the author and political pundit gave me a fabulous idea for today's Easter Day sermon, allowing me to put a radically different spin, a positive alternative, to his graphically "Mel Gibsonianesque" murderous account of Jesus' final days.

**Author Garry Wills, a person of Catholic faith by perspective and persuasion, having written opinions devoted to American history, politics, and religion, declares in his book *What Jesus Meant*, that "the resurrection of Jesus is the proof, as the Song of Songs has it, that 'Love is as strong as**

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<sup>1</sup>Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard, *Killing Jesus: A History* (Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2013, 1.

death (Cant 8:6)!”<sup>2</sup> And how right he is in this succinct assessment. Wills goes on to cite theologian N. T. Wright who “contends that only three interlocking things can give us confidence that Jesus is risen—the empty tomb, the multiple apparitions, and the seismic change in the followers of Jesus.”<sup>3</sup> Only an event of profound and utmost significance could create hope out of hopelessness in the despairing and depressingly downtrodden disciples whose dreams and aspirations had been violently dashed with every excruciatingly painful nail spike and every agonizing breath diminishing the life-capacity of their expiring Lord as they witnessed the disturbing demise of their gifted rabbi, mentor and friend. Yes, an empty tomb, a varied manifestation of appearances all led to what Wills calls a “psychic alteration” in the apostles, their behavior and demeanor radically shifting in what the Gospel writers describe as instantaneous, as if happening in a nanosecond in time frozen like an Eagle River lake. In the perhaps immortal words of the late John Shelby Spong, “something happened,” something real, epic, and tangible, something of the greatest impact and import in the history of humankind, something that shifted the disciples’ individual and collective behavior, changed their response, recalibrated the narrative in every positive and powerful way imaginable. In that regard, we all, believers and nonbelievers alike, can agree, can testify to the shaking of history’s foundations contained in the minimal acknowledgment that indeed, something of earth-shattering proportions happened once upon a time in the land of Israel. Welcome to “Resurrecting Jesus,” a wholesale operation that has been needed for more than 2000 years and is finally happening among contemporary, and yes, progressive, Christian believers who put more stock in Jesus’ life than in his death, finding what has by and large been untapped meaning and relevance, challenging long held bedrock beliefs, time-honored and yes, timebound traditions and historic understandings. It is a lot to attempt on a Sunday already full of metaphorical delight and wonderment, all-encompassing allegory and symbolism on steroids. But, here we go anyway! Easter sermon, 2023!

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<sup>2</sup>Garry Wills, *What Jesus Meant* (Penguin Books, New York, 2006), 124.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

**The problem seems to be that the Church, the Church triumphant, the Church catholic and apostolic, the Church universal, has spent most of its history spinning its wheels obsessed with Jesus' death, Communion itself reduced to nothing more than a memorial sacrifice, devoid of relevant meaning, the life of Jesus seemingly lost in the poor theological transactional translation of Christological retributive justice and vengeance. Mark Sandlin, writing this week as President and Co-executive Director of Progressive Christianity.org reminds us, "Possibly more than any other time of the year, Easter reminds me of how harmful some traditional Christian theology can be. For example, plenty of folks will hear messages throughout Holy Week that smack of redemptive suffering."<sup>4</sup> He is referring to the historic doctrine called Substitutionary Atonement that requires Jesus to be used for what turns out to be a divinely sanctioned child sacrifice, a slaughter only perpetrated to appease an angry God in need of such narcissistically motivated retribution and vengeance. Lest we all die instead because of our sin! Sandlin continues, "I find that to be ghastly theology, not to mention the fact that if suffering were redemptive, surely we would be redeemed by now."<sup>5</sup> Yes, just ask the surviving family and friends of those who have been victimized by gun violence in our country's many mass shootings. Just ask the citizens of Ukraine and all points elsewhere who have been subjected to the horrors of fate and human conquest and/or dominance. These are the kinds of relevant questions being considered and posed by many Christians today as they ponder the implications of ancient understandings that became holy writ, the Canon of scripture that comprises the Bible as we have it. As Wills notes, "Religion is still trying to kill Jesus!"<sup>6</sup>**

The Church along with all Christendom is long past due to begin to engage the life of Jesus as the very epitome, the exemplary image, of resurrection power, yes his life a resurrective metaphor unfolding in real time in everything he said and did in his lifetime. We need to reconsider a phrase that became synonymous with the Church and with our redemption, a

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Sandlin, Holy Week, 2003, Progressive Christianity.org.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Wills, 133.

synonym for salvation, that Jesus died for our sins. While that indeed makes for a tidy, even salient, a logical, rationally strong, biblical argument, perhaps we need to at least acknowledge that Jesus lived and lived a very full and productive and significant life. Yes, Jesus lived that we might have life and have it more abundantly, yes, in abundance. Insert biblical idea here! Yes, we need to find ways to embrace a holistic understanding of Jesus, emphasizing the man from Nazareth, a very real person of history, while reconsidering who he came to be claimed as the very Christ of God, incarnate Messiah, unfortunately turning him into a divine puppet creating the eternal polarities, the dichotomy, of heaven's bliss and hell's torment. Historically and traditionally speaking, Jesus frequently comes across as a divinely crafted robotic figure who only masqueraded as fully human, as a complete human being, pretending to be a man, a real man, and was conveniently used as a sacrificial vessel by a malevolent God who needed some spilt blood to atone for our presumed sinful nature, all the result of a perverted theological assumption about Original Sin. Jesus had no need for a God like that and, quite frankly, neither do we. I call to mind Matthew's Fox's beautiful imagery of "original blessing, what Richard Rohr indicates is original goodness, meaning that incarnation and resurrection have always been in relationship, two sides of the same coin, always found at the heart of creation. What God created as not just "good," but "very good," cannot go bad! Even in death there is life, transformation, resurrection forming the very DNA of God's creative purpose. As my friend Jill Bierwirth says, we have "original collateral," and it is always gaining interest not losing value. You do not have to borrow at the bank of Jesus to know God!" Our redemption is not found in death but in life, in our lives! We are resurrected when we participate in the resurrection of others!" And I would add that Jesus is raised again and again, continually, in the process!

**But enough talk about all this death and dying, including all those negative images associated with the Jesus of a Friday that contained nothing good about it. We have discussed that enough! Let us not only embrace the reality of resurrective power on Easter Day, life-giving resurrection that transcends this high and holy day, and throughout this wonderful season of Eastertide, but rather represents a driving force that should call and**

**captivate those of us who follow Jesus three hundred sixty five days a year throughout whatever time blesses us as a lifetime. Folks, when we offer the proverbial cup of cold water in his precious name, we are resurrecting Jesus, resurrecting ourselves, and we are living resurrected lives. When we feed the hungry, give drink to those who thirst, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned in whatever ways their lives are serving as suffocatingly confining and claustrophobic cells of disability and diminishment, we are resurrecting Jesus, resurrecting ourselves, and living resurrected lives. When we side in solidarity with those who live on the fringes of society, the disenfranchised and marginalized, lifting the downtrodden, advocating for and with those without voice, we are resurrecting Jesus, resurrecting ourselves, and we are living resurrected lives. When we preach against homophobia, racism, sexism, and xenophobia, speaking out against those who would stifle or destroy freedom of expression and conscious, who would deny basic liberties, Jesus is resurrected and so are we, emboldened and empowered to live resurrected lives. When we demand gun reform, basic controls that honor the second amendment but provide sobering protections for the most vulnerable, our children. When we become a witness demanding social justice, speaking truth to power, advocating unequivocally for Jesus' hospitably welcoming and inclusive and graciously merciful and peaceful love, when our walk matches our talk, when our testimony is full of grace and truth, when we practice what we transparently preach and preach what we practice for all the world to see, we are resurrecting Jesus, resurrecting ourselves, and we are living resurrected lives. When we choose service as our guidepost, our blueprint, our mantra, our touchstone, for living, Jesus is raised and so are we. When we choose to follow in Jesus' footsteps, emulating, yes, imitating, him in thought, word, and deed, we are resurrecting our rabbi, mentor and friend, resurrecting ourselves, and living resurrected lives.**

And while we are on the subject, at least sort of, kind of, Christians, all Christians, need to reevaluate the way we use the Bible, the way we quote it. And that means, we must learn it, remove our devotional filters and discover the essence as best as we are able the original information supporting these grand texts when they were written, the kernel of fact

undergirding these ancient narratives. As Richard Rohr demands, “Let’s use the Bible the way that Jesus did!”<sup>7</sup> After all, those who quote scripture the most tend to know its content the least! Think about it with me for just a moment! Many things, such as Sabbath observance, Jesus either ignored or modified. In fact, Jesus does not quote scripture all that much! And sometimes, when he quotes, he removes the parts he dislikes or finds troublesome! There are nineteen books in the Hebrew Bible from which Jesus does not quote, referencing none of it at all, if we trust the recollections of the Gospel writers as they recorded these precious memoirs. My hunch is that, had Revelation been written, Jesus would not have quoted from it, acknowledging now as almost unnecessary this wild tale is to a critically thinking contemporary mind. And while we are at it, there is a lot of stuff in the epistles Jesus would have avoided or ignored as irrelevant or wrong as well! No offense intended to any of those limited writers! According to Rohr, Jesus frequently disagrees with scripture, even reducing the 613 obscure but heavily enforced commandments down to two: love of God and love of neighbor!<sup>8</sup> Yes, Jesus quotes Leviticus, as many today are quick to do in their self-righteous judgmental hysteria regarding nonheterosexual people. But here is the only verse Jesus quotes from Leviticus: “You must love your neighbor as yourself!”<sup>9</sup> And neighbor meant everyone! If this was our biblical model what a different world Christendom would be and resurrection would be so much closer to being within our grasp. Yes, in Jesus’ words as attributed in the Gospels, we read resurrection!

**Yes, perhaps the secret to all of us being raised in Christ, to be risen to new life, fully alive and aware, self-conscious in every intuitive way imaginable, is centered in the basic disciplines our faith demands of us, yearns for us. We must develop at least a modicum, a fraction, of God-consciousness. The key, subtle but not-so-secret, to success is found in our being open and vulnerable to God and to one another, to be willing as well as able in**

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<sup>7</sup>Richard Rohr, *What Do We Do with the Bible?* (Center for Action and Contemplation, Albuquerque, NM, 2018, 2019), 49.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 57.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 56.

striving to live the way Jesus lived, day by day, yes, to think and act as he did as much as our limited capacity will allow. It is very simple but extremely complex. We accomplish nothing spiritually when we devolve into debates over bodily or physical resurrection versus a mystical experience of mysterious awe and wonder or when we argue about any other doctrinal mandate. Perhaps resurrection is both/and rather than either/or! Resurrection is a matter of faith no matter our deepest belief or our most oppressive doubt. No preacher or teacher can prove any of this stuff to anyone, ever! No one can! And, as I have argued, we can debate the efficacy, the veracity, of Jesus' death, no matter what meanings we glean from it, but none of that will make any difference in a hurting, suffering, world. Change only happens when and if, unless and until, we decide to do something, whatever circumstances and situations call forth from us in a given moment in time with a given individual or group. Our solitary creedal north star must be love! Indeed, love conquers all, including death. Love cannot be killed! The things for which Jesus stood and stands cannot be killed! At the risk of heresy, I am not sure that even Jesus is most or if at all concerned about what we believe about his death and the reports verifying his resurrection. He would simply ask, "When did you feed, quench, clothe, and visit?" That would be his main, perhaps his only, concern, his priority, job one and following! Our job is to roll away the stones of injustice and oppression whenever and wherever we find them. We reject the architects, the builders, of these human ills and evils! Yes, Jesus cares about what you do and who you are, your integrity, the authentic, genuine, you, what makes you tick, what gives you joy and satisfaction, whatever is your heart's desire, your pearl of great price. Jesus wants all humanity to be found even in the assumed midst of their lostness and it has nothing to do with any transactional salvific formula we can recite or repeat under pressure.

The disciples offer us a great glimpse into their world during the crucible of time between Jesus' death and their emerging, evolving, consciousness, what was obviously an enlightening awareness, a sense or feeling that assured them that all was well and that Jesus was with them, restored and resurrected. Matthew tells us that when the women, yes, it was the

women who first learned of these amazing events, heard from the angel at the open and empty tomb that they were filled with fear and excitement. Then Jesus entered the picture and confirmed for them all they thought they were seeing and experiencing. Yes, life is full of fear and excitement and everything in between. The story of the disciples at this bellwether moment in time was that a band of frightened, depressed, despondent, and despairingly hopeless believers whose bold hopes, dreams had been dashed, whose frail and fragile belief and faith in something far greater than themselves had been shattered, came alive in an instant, in the instantaneous nanosecond it took for them to realize that their Humpty Dumpy world, at least for now, they would all die a martyr's death, was put back together and they could move on with their lives, resurrected lives committed to everything they had learned during their three year adventure with Jesus. No matter, whatever, you believe or do not believe about the foundations undergirding the celebration of this high and holy festival day, may you be resurrected in every way that resurrection happens in this life, trusting that resurrection was and is real, the Spirit realized within you the ultimate confirmation. All you need to know! Therein is all the proof of the proverbial pudding you will ever need! As for Jesus, with every step we take, hopefully following in his precious footsteps, we continue the journey, his journey and ours, always walking by faith and not by sight and thankfully, there but by the grace of God go all of us as we ponder these not so temporal but very eternal mysteries. After all, it is always about mystery! Resurrection is real even when imagined! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Thanks be to God! Be raised, living resurrected lives, knowing that resurrection is all around us and within us in every imagined and unimagined thing this universe including each one of us has to offer.

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and longs for us to be risen to new life, living resurrected lives as we seek to follow the resurrected Jesus! Amen and amen.