

2021_04_06 why didn't you tell me that at the beginning

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(I'm giving a retreat for the seminarians at St. John's Seminary in Camarillo this week, and preaching every day. So I will be able to post a short something each day this week.)

There's a story I heard once about a monastery in North Africa. A young tribal man used to come around the community often trying to figure out what these guys in robes were doing all day. Gradually he started asking questions and so the monks would explain different aspects of their life to him and various bits and pieces about Christianity. At one point one of the monks decided to give the young man a Bible and told him to start by reading the Gospels. Well, the young man came back a few days later visibly irritated. The monk who had given him the Bible asked him what was the matter, the young man waved the Bible at him and said, "It says in here that he came back from the dead!" "Well, yes," the monk replied. "Why are you so upset?" And the young man said, "Why didn't you tell me that at the beginning?"

A lot of times we hear that the gospels, especially the Gospel of Mark, are simply an introduction to the Passion narratives, and you could get that impression from films about Jesus, too. But no: the Gospels, even the Passion narratives, are really long introductions to the Resurrection. The rest of the gospel is a kind of a flash back. I've yet to see a film about Jesus where they show the resurrection first and then go back and tell the story, but I think that would be most fitting. "Why didn't you tell me that at the beginning?" Even all through the celebrations of the Easter Triduum, we already knew the ending, and that's what makes them so full of joy and anticipation.

So we need relocate Easter and Jesus' resurrection, and recognize it as the high point of our Christian year, because it is! It's the supernova, it's the explosion at the very center of our faith, and all our hope and love are based on this. We need a whole spirituality, ecclesiology—no, we need a whole way of life based on the resurrection!

But first we have to re-examine what the moral of the resurrection story is, and clarify what we think it is that the resurrection has to teach us about the end goal of life—and start with that. If we think that the whole point of the story of the resurrection is about me dying and going to heaven, well, that's one thing, and all I need to do is wait this life out, and try not to commit any sins—or beg for mercy! But my going to heaven is too small a thing; there is a bigger picture and it's not all about me! The end goal of all things according to Scripture is a *new heaven and a new earth*.^[1] The resurrection shows us that Jesus isn't just in heaven; Jesus is already the beginning of the new earth! That's why that empty

tomb is so important. Even the matter of Jesus' poor crucified broken body wasn't left behind; that too was taken up into glory, which means that the new earth has already begun.

If I may quote Bishop N. T. Wright: left to ourselves "we lapse into a kind of entropy, acquiescing to the general belief that things are getting worse" –global warming, terrorism, genocide, slave labor—"but there's nothing much we can do about them." But we are wrong about that: "God's new creation has begun and we have a job to do!" Our task is to "live as resurrection people in between Easter and that final day"^[2] when *God will be all in all*, in anticipation not only of heaven but in anticipation of a new earth, as a sign of Easter—a people of hope in action—and as a foretaste of the fullness. Our job is to *implement* Easter while we wait with joyful hope for that final day when God will be all in all.

If we could get that through our thick heads, everything would change. We're part of the new earth! Jesus' resurrection isn't about death; it's about new life! That's why we take care of our bodies, and that's why we take care of the poor and each other's bodies; that's why we write songs and plays and poems; that's why we work to change political structures and grow beautiful gardens and build energy efficient homes—as a sign of Easter and in anticipation of the great day when there will be a new heaven and a new earth, because the new earth is already happening in us too, through our living out our Baptismal promises. And our evangelization is based on that—already a foretaste of the new heaven and the new earth and preparing the way for it as well—"already and not yet," "not yet but somehow already."

I'm giving a retreat about kenosis all this week, the self-emptying that is at the heart of our Christian spirituality. But I want to make sure we start with this, and make sure we always start with that, like a breathless Mary announced to the apostles hiding in fear—Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by his death. And upon those –and us! –in the tombs, restoring life!

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Monday in the Octave of Easter

^[1] 2 Pt 3:13, Rev 21:2.

^[2] N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 29-30.