

There are some things in life which are better left unanalyzed. Casseroles are one such thing. Every time I go to a church supper, and see people going from one dish to another loading up their plates, I wonder how much they would eat if each hot dish had a sign in front of it, listing its ingredients. I wonder how many people would eat my casseroles if they read a list of ingredients. But if you don't ask, they taste good. We're probably better off to leave it at that.

There are some works of literature that I at least, appreciate less after I have analyzed them. I remember as a junior in college reading Milton's Paradise Lost and being profoundly moved by it in places. The more I knew about Milton--his theology, his sexism, his politics--the less I was able to see the beauty of his work through my intellectual problems with it. And I suppose I sound fairly anti-intellectual here, and I will own that. I do believe that our intellects are a great gift, and they bring us much useful and joyful information. But they are not all there is to us. When my child smiles at me, it is not my intellect which responds. As I walked to church this bright and beautiful Easter morning, I did not want to analyze what it was in the sun and the sky and the greening grass which lifted my spirits. There are some things in life best approached intellectually, and others where we learn more if we experience them with our senses, with our hearts, with our spirits.

Easter is one such event. Easter is the most a-intellectual event or experience I know. It is best not approached with our minds. If we approach it that way we are bound to stumble, to trip over it, to turn away. Easter is, without question, unproveable, unreasonable, at odds with scientific method and historical data. If we approach the resurrection intellectually we end up sounding just like the disciple Thomas saying, "Show me. Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe." Poor Thomas. Doubting Thomas. He has been so maligned for his faithlessness, and yet, I believe his words express the feelings of all of us. Wouldn't you like to see? Wouldn't you like proof of this event we call the Resurrection? Like to know what it is that you are saying when you say, "He is risen!"

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe," proclaims the writer of the Gospel of John. The truth is that most likely none of us will ever see the Risen Lord, be able to touch the marks in his hands and in his side. If we are going to believe at all, we will have to believe as those who have not seen, have to trust in this matter not our intellects, but our hearts. We will have to trust the lifting of our spirits at the sound of the trumpets and the words, "He is risen." Trust the sense that though we don't know quite what to make of this story, how it happened, what happened, what it means exactly, still year after year we want to hear the story over and over again. Look at this sanctuary, how many people are here. And I don't want to embarrass you who come infrequently, but don't you think it's interesting, all of you, that the times we get the largest crowds in this church, any church, are the times when we tell the two most implausible stories of our faith, Christmas and Easter, the story of Jesus' birth and the story of his resurrection, beyond its irrationality, speaks a "yes" to our souls, and beyond fact, we know it to be the truth which we most want to hear. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

Those of us who can believe without seeing are blessed, I think. And I don't mean that in the sense that if you decide to believe, if you jump through that hoop, then somehow you are a superior person and God is going to zap you with some sort of blessing. It is more subtle than that. The blessing or blessings come from the belief itself. If you believe this, to whatever extent you can believe in the resurrection, then to that extent your life is changed because your understanding of who God is and how God deals with this creation is changed. There are several forms that this blessing, this understanding, can take, but

this morning I would like to talk briefly about three, three things which the resurrection tells us, if we dare to believe in it. Three facets of understanding this event which we call Easter.

The first blessing which we receive, I think, is that to whatever extent we believe in the resurrection, to that extent, then we understand in our hearts that God's ultimate word to us, that beyond which there will be no more said, that word is "yes". That word speaks of a love so great that it will not reject us no matter how long and to what extent we choose to reject it. The final word of our God is not vengeance, not punishment, not judgement, not indifference, but a love which pursues us and will remain with us for all time.

I remember when I was eight years old and I went out to play one day. There were some older kids walking by with these two beautiful kites. So I followed them, and even when they kept walking beyond the bounds of the neighborhood I knew, still I went on behind them, not thinking, only that I wanted to see those kites and how they flew. And we got to this vacant lot, and they flew the kites and I watched, and the afternoon got later, so I started to walk home, but didn't know which way to go. And I walked and walked and walked, and it began to get dark, so I knew I was really late, and my parents would be angry. I was afraid of being lost, but also afraid to go home. I thought of not going home at all. But as the sky grew darker, finally the streets looked familiar, and I found my way home, and stood outside of the house, wanting to go in--I had missed dinner--but not wanting to be yelled at, though I knew I had it coming. It took all my courage to go up to the door and open it, and there was my mother and I started to cry and say I was sorry before she would be angry. But she just held me, and told me that she loved me, and held me some more. And I was so glad to be home.

To me, the first message of the resurrection is that that is how God will always be with us when we come home tired, and fearful, and knowing that we deserve to be punished. What we get instead is God's arms around us and the word that we are loved. We need not therefore relate to God primarily out of a stance of fear or guilt; we need not stand outside the house wondering if we dare go in. No matter how far and how long we have been away, still we are loved and are welcome. And to whatever extent we feel this to be true, we live our religious life, and perhaps all of our lives, not relating to God because we ought to, not because we have to, but because we choose to; not because we must be obedient in order to achieve God's love, but because God's love frees us to respond in return. Beyond the "no's" small and large, that we say each day to ourselves, to others, to this earth, and to God, the word of God always comes back to us as "yes", a blessing for those who have not seen, and yet believe.

There is a second blessing which comes to us, I believe, in so far as we can believe in the resurrection, in the power of God to bring life out of death. That blessing is an inward sense of the constant reality of hope beyond despair, of joy the other side of death, of wholeness and wellness beyond sickness, sorrow or pain. And I do not mean this in a Pollyannaish sense, a trivial, "every cloud has a silver lining" sense. There are clouds in all our lives which loom large and black and dangerous. I would not deny their reality or their power. Nor would I deny, however, the will and power of our God, which comes to us through time and beyond time assuring us that there will always be a light which shines in the darkness. And no matter how long or deep or high that darkness, the darkness shall not overcome it.

I was reading last month the book by Victor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning, where he talks about his experiences in a concentration camp during World War II. He writes that after a while what was surprising was not the fear or the brutality, the hunger, or the abasement of human beings. What surprised him was that through that experience so many, more than a handful, still managed to perform acts of kindness and self-sacrifice, moments of high dignity, moments which spoke to the beauty and purpose of life and a hope beyond the present even in that place. A light shining even in that foul and deep darkness, which the darkness could not

completely overcome. To whatever extent we can believe that, it is a blessing which gives us courage, hope, the ability to go on when it is easier to quit, a blessing to those who have not seen and yet believe.

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And one final blessing this morning which we are given through this Easter event, and that is the assurance from our God that death is not the end of life, but merely a passage, that death is not the enemy to be feared, so that we are free then to live our lives beyond that fear. I have some disagreements with the apostle Paul in some of his theology, but I do believe that one of the places where he is brilliant, one of the places where he is absolutely right, is in understanding the connection between sin on the one hand and fear of death on the other. If we would just understand that we need not be afraid, not even of death, especially not of death, then it is that understanding more than any other which frees us to love and serve God and our neighbors with courage and true compassion. As long as we are afraid of death, that fear controls our lives, causes us to hoard more than our share of earth's resources, to lie, to compete, to seek power, to defend ourselves from our neighbors, to be more willing to kill in the name of peace than to die in the cause of peace. "He is risen," we proclaim on Easter morning, and the meaning of those words is that we need not fear the passage of death, that we are held in God's love both throughout our life and beyond our life. To whatever extent we understand that truth, we are free people: able to choose our behaviors and priorities rather than responding out of fear, able to choose to live our lives or to give them up. I think of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the word that he lived by, "All they can do is to kill me." I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who, when detained by the Gestapo, had one man say to him: "Don't you understand. I can take your church away. I can take your livelihood away. I can even take your life." And Bonhoeffer in return said to him, "My friend, you are wrong. It is I who will choose if I will give them to you." To be freed from fear, even the fear of death, the ultimate blessing of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ; a blessing to those who have not seen and yet believe.

This Easter morning I would not deny to you the difficulty of understanding that which we proclaim today: that Christ is risen, and he who was dead is alive again. It does not make sense; it is not rational; we cannot grasp it with our intellects. But here we are, and here we come year after year to hear these words and feel the joy which comes to life within us when we hear them. The story speaks to our hearts, it resonates to our very souls, bringing with it so many blessings: blessing of love and hope and freedom. "Blessed are they who have not seen and yet believe." "Christ is risen indeed." Amen.