

A Witness to the Resurrection: When Finished Isn't Final!

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Several years ago I attended a ministers' conference after Easter. At the close of the meeting as we were putting our papers away and saying good-byes, someone said almost as an afterthought, "Read Hans Küng on the resurrection, *On Being a Christian*, page 356. It is great!"

"What an irrelevant comment," I thought. "And we weren't even talking about the resurrection." But I remembered page 356. It is an occupational hazard of preachers to note anything which might be helpful in preparing sermons, particularly Easter sermons!¹ A couple of days after I got home, I pulled down my dusty copy of *On Being a Christian* and turned to page 356.

Under the heading, "the ultimate reality," I found a remarkable theological exposition of the resurrection. "The resurrection faith is not an appendage to faith in God, but a radicalizing of faith in God. It is a faith in God which does not stop halfway, but follows the road consistently to the end...the end which is also a new beginning. Anyone who begins his (her) creed with faith in 'God the almighty Creator' can be content to end it with faith in eternal life." Küng goes on to describe the God we worship as the one "who raised Jesus from the dead." So the One who begins things in creation ends them in resurrection. God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.²

I hope this brief sketch of Küng's thought will get your attention as my colleague's strange announcement did mine and get you to read Küng. The insight about God as finisher isn't new. It has been central to the story all along. As Charles Cousar puts it, "To affirm that Jesus is raised from the dead is to believe that God is able to do as God has promised."³ This strikes me as being a strange and refreshing word in our day when people are cynical because promises are not kept and endings seem final. We are accustomed to closure, but hope is in short supply.

What if, to paraphrase Yogi Berra, "It ain't over when it's over"? Have you ever been to a movie when people did not leave at the end? They sat in silence as the credits rolled. I have had the experience several times and on each occasion the movie had ended but those of us in the theater knew it was not over. It would go with us as we left.

One movie in which we sat in silence at the end was "Schindler's List." It was about a man whose life is changed. He was not a saint—far from it. He was a German trying to make a quick mark during the Nazi period. He was using Jewish labor to manufacture military supplies. But something happened. He saw a little Jewish girl being rounded up for the death camp. He could not continue with business as usual and what he did made a difference.

Maybe we sat in the theater silently as the credits rolled because we sensed the power of evil at work in the death camps. It is the same silence we experience at the sight of children dodging bullets in our cities or starving in Rwanda. Or maybe we sat in silence because we had sensed a power at work in Schindler's life which was more

powerful even than death. Through the lens of faith, I realized that I had recognized this power as the same One who raised Jesus from the dead. Even in the face of death camps, that power is set loose in this world where it can change us. It can make a difference. That is why I was silent.

The Easter message is about an ending which isn't final. The implications for our lives are staggering. If God is the finisher, then things are not as they appear and God may have some new things to teach us. On Easter Mary Magdalene is our chief witness (John 20:1-18). She gives us a clue as to how resurrection faith may work in our lives.

"Endings are important," said the funeral director. Any pastor worth his or her salt knows he is right. We need to help people do their grief work. Mary Magdalene, doing her grief work, went to the tomb. She operated on the same assumption we do: Endings are final and we should get about the business of a decent and orderly burial. But the tomb was open and she made the logical conclusion that someone had taken the body.

Through Mary's weeping we see the human response to death. She is engaged in what Emily Dickinson calls the "solemnest of industries: The sweeping up of the heart, and putting love away."⁴ But is this the end? A strange thing happens at the cemetery. In the face of death, a new beginning is born. Mary thinks she is trying to strike a deal with the gardener. "Tell me where you have put him and I'll take care of him." Jesus calls her by name, "Mary." She recognizes him and becomes a witness to the resurrection: "I have seen the Lord."

In a society where we often feel like a random series of numbers, naming is important. Jesus calls Mary by name. We do it in the sacrament of baptism to affirm that God claims us and knows us by name. Our identity is tied to the sacrament. So it is indeed appropriate at "the end" to begin "A Service of Witness to the Resurrection" in this manner:

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ
have clothed yourselves with Christ (Gal. 3:27).

In her baptism Mary was clothed with Christ;
in the day of Christ's coming,
she shall be clothed with glory.

What a remarkable claim to make in a society where children are abused and the elderly get lost. It is an appropriate way to affirm that a God who has named us will never abandon us. Not even death can separate us from the love of God. We do grieve with Mary in the face of death but not as those who have no hope.

Resurrection faith is about an ultimate reality at work in what appears to be hopeless situations. Let me call another witness. Reynolds Price in a remarkable book, *A Whole New Life*, tells about his struggle with cancer. In 1984, a tumor was discovered in his spinal cord. Surgery and radiation caused him loss of control of his lower body. The book should be required reading for ministers and doctors because of his honest description of the feelings and frustrations that accompany such an experience.

Price discovers that he has been called to live "a whole new life." Striving to be the person he was before cancer was a futile exercise. When he accepted the challenges after cancer, he discovered a new life. He tells about two experiences along the way.

One is a vision in which Jesus appears to him in the lake of Kinnereth, the Sea of Galilee:

Jesus silently took up handfuls of water and poured them over my head and back till water ran down my puckered scar. Then he spoke once, "Your sins are forgiven." To which Price responded, "It's not my sins I am worried about. Am I also cured?" Jesus turns and says to him, "That too."⁵

The cancer has not killed Price, but he has experienced tremendous pain. He looks at his life: "A realistic estimate included paralysis, dependence on others, untouchable pain, and the absence of work. Maybe I'd really been tricked in my 'vision.' Death would solve at least the other quandaries." So he cried out to God, "How much more do I take?" And then he heard a voice that said one word. "More."

Where would he get the strength to endure more? The next day Price asked to take the sacrament of communion. In tasting the elements that morning he writes, "I experienced again the almost overwhelming force which has always felt to me like God's presence. Whether the force would confirm my healing or go on devastating me, for the moment I barely cared. No prior taste in my old life had meant as much as this new chance at a washed and clarified view of my fate.... In many calmer hours to come, I'd know that my answer to the one word *More* was three words anyhow...*Bring it on.*"⁶ Reading the book affirms a faith that a power is at work in life whose end, as Küng suggests, is a new beginning. Such is the nature of resurrection faith.

The story is told about a witness at the Nuremberg War Crime Trials.⁷ He had escaped a death camp and the gas chamber. This witness survived by living for a time in an open grave in a Jewish cemetery in Wilna, Poland. While he was there, he saw a young woman give birth to a child in a nearby grave. In her delivery she was assisted by an eighty-year-old grave digger. When the baby uttered its first cry, the old man prayed, "Great God, hast thou finally sent us the Messiah? For who but the Messiah could be born in a grave?" Who indeed? Who but God the Finisher can turn endings into new beginnings?

NOTES

¹ In his novel, *The Tongues of Angels* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1990), Reynolds Price has a character say of his father: "But he sees a sermon in a pile of dog do," 67.

² Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 356-361.

³ *Texts for Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 274.

⁴ Emily Dickinson, "The Bustle in a House," *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co.), 166.

⁵ Reynolds Price, *A Whole New Life* (New York: Atheneum, 1994), 43.

⁶ Price, *A Whole New Life*, 80-81

⁷ Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 165.