

We Who Must Die Demand a Miracle

John B. Rogers, Jr.

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, North Carolina

The Pilgrim Way has led to the Abyss.

.....

We who must die demand a miracle.

How could the Eternal do a temporal act,

The Infinite become a finite fact?

Nothing can save us that is possible:

We who must die demand a miracle.

(W. H. Auden, "For the Time Being")¹

Christian preaching announces not *a* miracle, but *the* miracle. In Auden's *Christmas Oratorio* quoted above, the saving miracle is the Incarnation - the Word made flesh, Immanuel (God with us). In his birth and life, his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ is the temporal act of the Eternal (God), the Infinite (God) become finite fact. This miracle comes to dramatic focus in the cross and resurrection where "for us and for our salvation," God in Christ engages and destroys the powers of evil, sin, and death. What God has done for the redemption of "the world and those who dwell therein" (Ps. 24:1) is the heart of the church's Easter proclamation.

Those whose responsibility and privilege it is to preach this Easter gospel will find a rich resource in the writing of John Calvin. (See especially *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II, xvi and III, xxv; Calvin's *New Testament Commentaries*.)² Calvin's emphasis on the priority and freedom of God in the resurrection is especially welcome over against the modern tendency in church and culture to take even the good news of Easter into our own hands, and to locate the source of our hope in ourselves: for example, in the human capacity for memory and being remembered, in the good deeds that carry on our influence, in romantic dreams about nature's perennial awakening, or in experiences of "life after life" so often invoked as "evidence" of our natural survival.

Since this is a journal for preachers, I have selected certain main themes that mark Calvin's understanding of the resurrection, and that suggest three approaches to Easter preaching.

I. "At the Limit of Human Possibility"

Above all, Calvin understood the resurrection as God's act, as an event of which God and only God can be the source, the cause, and the subject. Resurrection, for Calvin, is a palpable reality - not simply a symbol or a metaphor. Easter is a demonstration of the sovereign and invincible power of God.

Consider the drama and suspense of Mark's Easter narrative (Mark 16: 1-8). Everything lies under the shadow of death as Mark pictures the women hurrying toward the cave in Joseph's garden. They are thinking of a corpse already awaiting the onset of decay, and a tomb sealed with a great rock too large for them to move.

Everything about the scene - the grave, the corpse, the sealed finality of death - brings us, along with the women, to the limit of human competence, human experience, human understanding, human imagination . . . to the end of human possibility.

But what do we find at this point? We find the stone rolled away, the tomb empty, the corpse gone. Here, at the limit of human possibility, resurrection takes place. "He has risen! He is *not* here!" The Easter announcement comes from beyond ourselves, beyond the realm we claim to control.

"Not here." With that word, the line is crossed between human possibility and that which is possible only with God. The empty tomb is the contradiction of all human quests and undertakings, all human claims and accomplishments, all human powers and possibilities. Resurrection means that God brings life *out of death*. We cannot emphasize that point too much. Here at the final boundary there is only one possibility of any sort - God's possibility. "Behold, I make all things new!" (Rev. 21:5). The last and most fundamental question that faces human life - the question of death - calls forth the first real answer. What for us is the final straw is, for God, the moment of sovereignty: "He has risen! He is not here!"

Resurrection means that God stands at the boundary of our existence, and if God is there it is also true that our lives are encompassed, determined, governed, and at last gathered up by God. This means that no one lives or dies apart from God, that all of us count with God, and that God is not content to leave us estranged from himself in life or in death. In that assurance - the assurance of the resurrection - we can live and die, we can lay our beloved dead away, and we can face the future with a measure of confidence and courage.

Resurrection is a mysterious, even alien event. It is, Calvin contended, difficult for us to believe. It is so contrary to human expectation, intelligence, and experience (compare the women in Mark's narrative). Resurrection is much harder to believe than some concept of the immortality of the soul, which strikes us as more "natural." This, however, is precisely the point: resurrection is *not* natural, *not* reasonable, *not* within the realm of human possibility to understand or control or guarantee. To receive the resurrection as good news is to confess, with Luther, that

Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He,
The Lord of Hosts His name, from age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.

("A Mighty Fortress Is Our God")

II. "Hid With Christ in God"

Resurrection, for Calvin, meant the "regnum Christi" - the sovereign, gracious rule of Christ in and over all of life. This is the firm foundation of our lives, and the ground of our hope. Resurrection means that God is faithful, that Christ reigns, and that our lives are "hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3).

Calvin always thought of the cross and resurrection as one event in which God engaged and destroyed the powers of evil, sin, and death. Therefore, to preach the Easter message is to announce the victory of God, and to invite people to live in the confidence of that victory, our lives reaching upward and forward in eager hope and

joy.

Another approach to Easter preaching, then, is to focus on what it means to live under and to live on this Easter faith. What might it look like, the life of an individual or congregation for whom the bedrock conviction is: "Your life is hid with Christ in God"? What might life be like if every morning a person began the day by repeating what the young man told the women at the empty tomb: "He is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him" (Mark 16:7, cf. Matt. 28:7; cf. also Luke 24: 13-35)? Galilee was their home, their life, the only place they had to go. This meant that now Christ awaited them at the edge of every moment, that he filled all their tomorrows. Luke's story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus serves as an illustration of the text in Mark and Matthew. "He is going before you." That word violates every dimension of life. Easter has nothing to do with what we possess or think or accept or understand. The resurrection is God's usurpation of all human history, all human possibility, all human possessions, all human understanding, all human achievement. Because of Easter every life is now laid open before Jesus of Nazareth who threatens and offers to take it over. The Christian life is not a step into an unknown future, an undertaking of unknown consequences, a venture into alien territory. We may not know precisely what the future holds, but because of the resurrection we do know who holds the future, and us.

III. "But God, Who is Rich in Mercy . . ."

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which
he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses,
made us alive together with Christ (Ephesians 2: 4-5).

Calvin saw in Christ's resurrection the promise and assurance of our own. "In the head," he wrote, "has begun what must necessarily be completed in all the members."³ And again, "the resurrection of Christ has reached into all tombs with its life-giving perfume."⁴ The assurance that Christ has us in his keeping gives us the answer to the question of death (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Question 1), and we do not have to go outside Christ for any other basis of our faith and hope. In a delightful commentary on the Emmaus road story in Luke 24, Calvin noted that, as with the disciples on the road, our hope is not in our senses (our hearing and seeing) or in our experiences and feelings (even though "our hearts burn within us"). It is only by God's mercy that we are able to hear the announcement, "He is risen," to see the Christ who goes before us, to have the mystery and miracle of the resurrection take hold of our hearts and minds and lives.

To preach at Easter means not only to declare God's victory and to announce the "regnum Christi." There is something about preaching the resurrection that will almost certainly offend a culture that likes to arrange things to suit itself, including its response to death. Resurrection is not God's meeting us on an equal footing; it is not God's part in some cooperative effort; it is not God's lending a hand in a project in which we are already making splendid progress and, given enough time, could complete on our own. Resurrection is God's invasion of this world and this life with its doubts and sorrows, its anxieties and fears, its sin and guilt, its grave mounds and

tombstones. Resurrection is God's decisive assault upon the powers of evil, sin, and death to deliver us from their bondage.

The disturbing, offensive truth in the Easter message is that this is our only hope. Resurrection takes from us every claim to self-sovereignty and self-sufficiency in face of death. "Nothing can save us that is possible," wrote W. H. Auden of the human condition - nothing within the reach of our abilities and attainment. "We who must die demand a miracle."

Whatever else resurrection means, it means that I am *not* the master of my fate. I am *not* the captain of my soul. "Our help in ages past" is not in the strength of our arms. "Our hope for years to come" is not in the power of our intellect. "Our shelter from the stormy blast" is not in the genius of our science and technology. And "our eternal home" is most assuredly not in any of the ideological claims or political movements or "genitive theologies" to which the church is so eager to hitch its wagon. "*But God*, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ."

And yet, how vigorously we resist this offensive claim! We presume to prop up the Easter gospel with talk about the rebirth of nature or the hatching of butterflies. We rush to buy books by and about people who have "died" and been resuscitated and who tell of their experiences "on the other side." Worst of all we go to, or take part in, funerals where the Easter message is trivialized or even denied by someone telling cute little anecdotes about the deceased to cover over the reality of death. Some time ago, I attended the funeral of a friend's daughter, a wonderful, gifted nineteen-year-old girl who had been killed in an automobile accident. The minister began the service by saying: "As Shakespeare said, 'The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones.' This was certainly not true of (name) ." He then went on to tell about how much this young woman had loved children, how she had enjoyed volunteering in the nursery at his church, and how he was certain now that she had been given the job of supervising the nursery in heaven. I came away from that service angry because family, friends, and fellow believers who came to that service hoping to find bread were fed stones. That young woman and her family at least believed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. You could not have told from the minister's remarks that he believed it. What he said trivialized the gospel and never really seemed to understand that people might well die in the hope of its truth. Indeed, death was hardly mentioned; it was as if the deceased had inadvertently caused an embarrassing unpleasantness that needed to be covered up. So the minister told cute, clever little stories - stories that were not offended by the complicated, tragic, chaotic, and unanswerable events of life. There was in that service no honest encounter with the cross, and consequently no strong word of resurrection offered in, to, and over against the tragedy of this death. There was no "But God . . .!"

A friend of mine once said he was not sure how people get faith, that he suspected that faith gets us, and that in any case be believed that faith is a gift. He was, however, sure how people lose faith. They lose faith from listening to the church trivialize the gospel. Meditations such as the one I heard at that young woman's funeral service are devastating. They kill and do not make alive. They empty faith of any import; they evacuate life of any substance; they deny the truth of any gospel that takes its starting point in the cross.

The good news, however, is that the real truth of the resurrection turns out to be

too powerful; it will not remain concealed behind such silliness. Resurrection rises up, as Karl Barth suggested, and shouts at us: "Do you really think that is all I have to say to you? Do you really believe that is why Jesus came to earth, why he agonized and suffered and died, why God raised him from the dead . . . to become merely a symbol for the truth, which really is no truth, that eventually everything will naturally, as a matter of course, and on its own, be all right?" So also life itself stands up, grasps us by the lapels, and demands, "Do you really think that by this easy and convenient way you can solve me? Do you not yet understand what I am all about? The mystery of human existence, the reality of sin and our struggle against it, the mystery of death... do these things not draw you away from the shallows and into the deeps of life? How is it that you imagine you can come through all these things without an absolutely mighty, absolutely true, absolutely ultimate word of victory that is the vital core of life; without this mighty word of resurrection?! Is all this still obscure to you?"⁵

No book on death and dying, no artistic achievement, no therapeutic technique, no personal accomplishment, no warm memories or spiritualization of Easter can break the power of sin and death. "But God . . . !" That is the word that towers above us on Easter morning.

Someone might well object: "I cannot understand that. It does not square with my experience. I have no reasonable grounds on which to trust such a claim." The gospel answers: of course not. Resurrection has no rational ground to which human knowledge and experience can be brought to prove it, or to make it true. It is not a question as to whether we can grasp it, whether there is some supporting proof of it. The question is: can the resurrection grasp us, and give us the freedom to breathe and rejoice in this "But God . . . !" - this word from beyond us that is truer than all our experiences and reasons, truer than all our doubts and afflictions, truer than graves and tombstones, death and hell?

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.

This is the word that must conquer us at Easter. And may God deliver us from squandering the opportunity to preach this word of his sovereign love and invincible grace in Jesus Christ for the sake of another, less profound word of our own devising.

Notes

¹ *Religious Drama*, ed. Marvin Halverson (Cleveland and New York, The World Publishing Company, 1957), 17.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960).

³ _____, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, ed. D. W. and T. F. Torrance, (Grand Rapids. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972).

⁴ *Institutes*, III, xxv, iii, 990.

⁵ *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, III, 223.

⁶ Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen, *Come Holy Spirit* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1934), 153-154.