

Church of the Resurrection

Acts 9:36-43, Revelation 7:9-17

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Church is what happens while we are busy playing church. Resurrection is what happens when we thought the only option was lifelessness and despair. In the small community church I used to serve, the clerk of session and I had a child together. Did I fail to mention that to you in the vetting and interview process? The boy was 12 or 13 and a member of our church. He was the son of an alcoholic father who died early in his life and the son of a mother who was mentally impaired. They were barely making it the whole time we lived there, and occasionally the church would be called upon to help out with financial support or car repairs or monthly rent. I can still remember when they were able to move into government subsidized low-income housing and move out of their trailer on a rural county road. I helped them move a few things and can remember standing on their floor and being able to see through to the grass below and hoping that floor would hold for a few more minutes until we could get out of there and move them into their new apartment.

We had a weird early March snow in which there were about 3-4 inches of snow on the ground, but it was not cold enough to stick to the roads. The roads, however, were wet and slick. They were on their way home from the grocery store in the early evening and were crossing a busy four-lane highway and did not see the oncoming car that struck them on the mother's side. She was hospitalized and later transferred to the ICU of the University hospital where she lay in a coma for weeks. The phone call came just as I was getting comfortable clothes on and pulling back the sheets, ready for bed. It was the 13 year old boy. His mom was hurt bad, and the first person he thought to call, the first person he thought could help him, was his pastor. I wish I could say I immediately rose to the occasion and sprang out of bed, but I was not immediately sure what I needed to do. We had three young children at home and a 6 week old. Did he mean for me to come right then? Could I check in with him in the morning? Five minutes later the phone rang again; it was the boy, and he wanted someone to come now to be with him and to be there with his mom. So I called my session clerk (you session clerks remember what could someday be on your job description), and we went to the hospital together. In the midst of this moment, and on our drive to the hospital, I remember saying to her that this might be a moment for the church to show up. And it certainly was. None of this family's extended family could take in this child long-term. We did not know what the outcome would be for this mother. It would turn out that she would be on a breathing machine/ventilator for nearly 3 weeks.

And so one Tuesday morning in March, I found myself sitting in a courtroom before a judge alongside my session clerk requesting temporary custody of a middle school boy. For a brief period of time, we had a child together. Sometimes church is what happens while we are busy playing church. Sometimes resurrection is what happens while we are just hoping to get by. What I mean is that sometimes church is thrust upon us, and those sweet little vows we make at baptism bring late night phone

calls and highway emergencies and people into our lives that are difficult to manage. In this case, we prayed for a miracle and it came. The mother slowly recovered and was able to return home. Different members of the congregation housed the child for extended periods of time, medical bills were miraculously sorted out, and the church showed up, rose up, and showed us all once again what Christian community can be and also what Christian community demands of each of us. My time of parental custody ended up lasting 3-4 months, and as usual, the clerk of session did most of the work and still today thinks of our adopted child as one of her own. It was almost like Sunday after Sunday, hymn after hymn, prayer after prayer, sermon after sermon, we had been practicing and preparing for this moment. And when it came, we were jolted out of our regular routines and responsibilities and given a vision of what we were called to do and be...in that moment. Sometimes church is what happens to us while we are busy playing church. Sometimes resurrection just shows up and overtakes us and lifts us up.

A church is reduced to a dead and lifeless body until Peter kneels and prays and tells Tabitha to get up, and what was once a dead and lifeless body is raised to new life. Easter, it seems, is not just a one-off inexplicable and explosive miracle that took place once and for all with the crucified and dead Jesus, but Easter has ripple effects into which the risen Christ continues to create mini-resurrections wherever the spirit takes him, with Tabitha here in Joppa, with Paul on the Damascus road, with a small congregation's response to a tragic accident. Jesus has a way of tumbling into our own lives in moments that both challenge us to our core and at the very same time resurrect us and reveal to us once again who we truly are. The point of life and the point of our lives is not to get us into heaven, but to get heaven into us; not to achieve immortality for ourselves, but to find that even where we are dead and lifeless, Christ is at work resurrecting us. "Get up. And she opened her eyes, and sat up."

Revelation begins with a declaration that the time is near (1:3) and ends with the prayer for Jesus to come (22:20).¹ The author of Revelation is concerned that the Christian community is at risk of being coopted by the power and economic system of the Roman Empire, but even more, the author is concerned that the Christian community not be completely compromised and accommodated to the culture of that empire and its accompanying way of life rather than the beliefs, practices, and counter-cultural identity of those baptized into Christ's life. The author of Revelation wanted to challenge the church to a way of life that sought to draw "sharper boundaries between the church and the world," because as Richard Hays reminds us, there were those in the Christian community who thought they could blend in as "normal" members of society and could accommodate the emperor cult as a civic obligation without betraying their faith in Jesus.²

Ultimately the author of Revelation believes such compromises are hard for the church to bear and that the risen Christ seems to do his best work raising up a church in the midst of intense opposition and the unjust order of the present world. The author gives us a vision of heaven not just as a place to go after death, but as a vision of what happens when the crucified and risen and living Christ takes up residence in our lives and gets ahold of us, sometimes thrusting church upon us rather than letting us have it on our own terms. Our robes will be white, Revelation tells us, not because of all the great things we will achieve or even all the special religious feelings we are able

to collect or even the important stands we have the courage to take. Our robes will be white because they will have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. Our robes will be white because when the risen Christ shows up, he does not just let us play church or think we can accommodate every emperor cult that comes along or that we are here to solve all our world's problems or even all our problems.

Instead, we stand before his throne and sing our alleluias, we look forward with joy and confidence, and we trust that Jesus Christ will find a way once again to thrust church upon us while we think we are busy playing church.

Notes

1 Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 179.

2 Ibid., 177.