

Resurrection Is No Fairy Tale

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Dr. Victor Dzau is a professor at the Duke School of Medicine and recent President of the National Academy of Medicine. Under his leadership, The Academy launched the “Grand Challenge in Healthy Longevity.”¹ The purpose of this grand challenge is to incentivize medical research to extend human life span while keeping bad knees and hearing loss, not to mention weak hearts, from eroding quality of life. To age and maintain health, according to Dr. Dzau, will “unlock the opportunity of aging.” But the boldest among them are not interested in just lacking on a few years. They are convinced that science can make death optional.

In 2017, there was a fundraiser to benefit Healthy Longevity. It was held outside of Los Angeles in Norman Lear’s living room. Sergey Brin and Larry Page were there. They are the co-founders of Google. Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, was there. Like the rich man who came to Jesus asking “what must I do to inherit eternal life,” the room was jammed with powerful folks and Hollywood glitterati, all wanting to learn from scientists the secrets to living forever. Tuxedoed servers circled the room with delicious finger foods. Goldie Hawn asked about glutathione. It’s an antioxidant that protects mitochondria. Some call it the “God molecule.” Dr. Jonn Yun donated two million dollars from his healthcare hedge fund. Yun stated that aging is like a code in the human genome. The code can be hacked, he told an enthusiastic crowd, and “we can end aging forever.” Dr. Aubrey de Grey, the chief science officer of a Silicon Valley research foundation, asserts we can retool our biology and stay in our bodies forever. Dr. de Grey doesn’t expect to live long enough to witness this step toward immortality, so he has left instructions to be frozen in liquid nitrogen and thawed when the technology to achieve immortality is available.²

I have preached enough Easter sermons that the words “eternal life” are not foreign to my vocabulary, but I have to say, this quest to live forever sounds like a terrible idea. I’m all for extending life span a bit, but the idea of making death optional is terrifically foolish. Addressing finitude is not our greatest concern. Addressing our sin is a far greater concern. As human beings, we are beautiful, but also broken. As communities, we have moments of compassion, fairness, and grace, but every community also practices injustice and exclusion. The promise of resurrection is not simply a life that does not end, but rather a life that is transformed. That transformation will not be fulfilled until the dead are raised and all are welcomed into God’s promised day, but the transformation begins now. Resurrection is not simply about getting us into heaven; it’s about getting a little heaven into us. However, if you are stepping into the pulpit this Easter Sunday, you already know that amidst the trumpets and aroma of lilies and the gusto with which even infrequent worshippers sing

"Jesus Christ is Risen Today," the folks who fill your pews will no doubt feel that with the world as it is, the impact of resurrection is a bit restrained. The idea of simply extending life eternally in this world is not good news. We don't need more time; we need a better us. So, as you speak of this resurrected Christ, what will you say?

Once upon a time, the love of God lived in skin and breathed the same molecules of air that you and I breathe today. His teaching left listeners slack-jawed with both wonder and fear. He had a talent to whip up a feast from almost nothing. He would eat with anyone, which made the polished folks more than uncomfortable. He was known at least once to come through in a big way when the wedding of a friend ran out of wine. He made some friends who would be willing to take a bullet for him, or at least that's what they thought. But he also made serious enemies, particularly among people with power. He rode a donkey into the city as crowds laid a green carpet with palm fronds, while they held "Jesus for President" signs. For the powers that be, that was the last straw. He was killed in horrible and humiliating fashion. When he breathed his last, his broken body was buried. But when the world put him in the ground, God raised him up. As Mark tells it, some guy in pretty snappy dress said the risen one was going to Galilee. The Easter message was not simply that Jesus, once dead, is now alive, but just as importantly, "he is going ahead of you." His friends were called "followers." On Easter, the following continues. If I understand the text, he's going ahead to lead us to a better us. But looking at us, we must confess the impact of resurrection remains a bit modest.

To my mind and piety, Mark is both the humblest and bravest resurrection evangelist. He has told us everything he knows to tell of the Jesus story. But when he has told us everything he knows about Jesus, he writes that it is just "*the beginning* of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God" (Mark 1:1). What else could it be? If Jesus is really alive, and Mark believes he is, then the only part of the Jesus story Mark can tell is "the beginning." Mark tells his story and then hands the gospel pen to the next generation and to the next, to continue the narrative of how the resurrected Christ lives in a new day. The burden of every preacher is knowing that this gospel pen is now in her hands.

Where do we point to resurrection in our day—in these days when democracy is attacked, in these days when Putin is resurrecting nuclear threats, in these days when community after community is forced to rebuild as another flood, fire, or storm of the century leaves neighborhoods and sometimes whole communities wiped off the map, in these days when folks who identify themselves as followers of Jesus diminish the humanity of their neighbor, speaking of them not as humans but as "a political agenda"? In days such as these, the lordship of Jesus Christ is seldom obvious. However, we should not lose perspective. There have been better days, for sure. There have also been worse days, no doubt. But these are our days, and the gospel pen is in our hands.... So what do we say?

No doubt there will be some who wonder "Is it true?" I'll confess, that is not

my first question. In the last eighteen years, I have officiated more than 500 services hearing witness to the resurrection, some for people I barely knew, but others included my own father, as well as many in my congregation whom I have loved like family. Ironically, grief has been my resurrection teacher. I have watched ordinary people love one another with a heartbreaking love. Grief comes because there is a persistence to love. With us, love doesn't always say the right thing and doesn't always do the right thing, but love holds on. Love doesn't die, which is why death is so damn hard. I believe we love like that because the God who made us loves like that. Resurrection is reliable because God is love, and love holds on. The love of God simply refuses to grant death the power to pull us from God.

But resurrection is not just the promise that life doesn't end. It is the promise that life is being made right. It's not the veracity of resurrection that is hard to address; it's the modesty of resurrection. Resurrection leaves a rather humble fingerprint on the world. This "once upon a time" story of Jesus that includes miracles, social transformation, and the resurrected life of a dead man could read like a fairy tale, with one huge exception. Fairy tales always end with "and they all lived happily ever after." We don't. Of course, the fullness of resurrection will be known at the end. But Jesus is raised today! So, resurrection, like faith itself, engages us in a battle with forces much larger than we are. Transformation never comes easily.

While not a common text for Easter, the first parable that Jesus told offers a clarifying word. The Parable of the Sower is a hysterical story that tells of a farmer with the most unusual theory of agriculture. This sower appears to be paid for distribution rather than harvest. She sows gospel seed anywhere and everywhere with reckless abandon. There is no place this sower won't throw seed. The point is clear enough: there is no circumstance in which we should lose confidence in this seed. The seed, of course, is not an idea or even a doctrine: it's love. But, as the story goes, most of it fails. Love is choked out, scorched, even withers away. But finally, there is a bit of good soil, and that is enough. The seed produces a bumper crop thirty, sixty, hundredfold.

That's the way Mark tells it. Matthew, on the other hand, edits this parable in one interesting way. Rather than the harvest going up and up and up, Matthew says the harvest is hundred, sixty, thirtyfold. If I understand the text, Matthew wants us to pay attention to modest victories, lesser gains. Sometimes the victories of love are modest.

Over thirty years ago, I got a call late on a Friday evening. "Rev. Are, we need to see you. It's our marriage." I said, "Of course. I have time tomorrow." She said, "Excellent, we will be at your office at 7:30." In the morning?

I'm not a morning person. I know that there are those who spring to life with the rising of the sun. But myself, I think in God's promised day there will be about three mornings a week. They shouldn't be banned altogether, but having one every day is overdoing it. Nevertheless, I rose with the alarm. On the way to the church, I stopped

for a bucket of coffee. They were waiting for me when I arrived. I said, "Tell me what's going on." She said, "We aren't anything alike. We have such different expectations of life." "Say more about that," I said. "Well, for example, we woke up last Saturday. I asked, 'What would you like to do today?' He didn't immediately respond. 'I was thinking we might work in the yard before it gets too hot. After we mow the lawn, we could plant those shrubs I bought on Tuesday. Then you could hang the new ceiling fan while I'm at the grocery store. Then we could paint the porch swing; I've picked a nice seafoam green. Of course, we don't want to work all day, so I thought we could drive out to the beach and take a long walk, find inner peace, and on the way back we could stop for lunch. But that's just me,'" she said. "What would you like to do today?" He said, "I was hoping to get some coffee." "Coffee!" she says. "That's it?" "Well, it's a start." "That's all you want out of the day? Just coffee?" "You see our problem, don't you Reverend?" I looked at my coffee.

I used to be like her, except for the love of morning. I used to be convinced that my business would bring transformation. I trusted build it and they will come, seize the day, take no prisoners, on to victory, thirty, sixty, hundredfold. If Jesus could bring the kingdom *near*, we could bring it *here*! But over time, my expectations have moderated. We as people of faith simply do not have the influence we once assumed we held. Time has taught me that ministry is not always thirty, sixty, hundred...; sometimes it is hundred, sixty, thirty, ten, five. The church is not always lost in wonder, love, and praise. Sometimes we are just lost. I think Matthew would understand.

There are amazing things that happen in and through the church. Sometimes the harvest is hundredfold. Jesus is Lord, and he is risen indeed, and sometimes the church is where that is clearest. But like him, we still live in Herod's world. The climate is changing, and her wrath is witnessed in every news cycle. The gap between those who can't get a little and those who can't help but get more is expanding. Gun violence is as American as apple pie, and school children and concert goers and parade participants are paying with their lives for our second amendment freedom. The direction I thought we had agreed upon as a nation regarding race is now under constant challenge. And the nation that once figured out how to leave human footprints on the surface of the moon now seems to have lost the capacity to do hard things.

The needs of the world are dramatic, and we as people of faith are not very strong. You would be forgiven if you wondered if the risen one has gone so far ahead of us that he has left us behind. I think Matthew could relate. But he would also tell us to trust the seed. In every circumstance, trust the gospel. It will not always work, but trust the seed. Of course, the seed that you and I are called to sow is love—a resurrected love. Love is a power, but admittedly, it is a tender power. Love is a strength, but a vulnerable strength. The Easter angel promised us that love has gone ahead, and we will find it. The resurrection of Jesus Christ launches us into the battle not just for more time, but for a better us. And even though love's victories are often modest, love will win. Alleluia.

The church I served in Jacksonville, Florida, was across the street from a public park. Some of the unhoused in Jacksonville called that park home. Often on my way into the church, someone would ask for spare change or maybe a sandwich. One morning I walked down the street to a coffee shop, and one of the guys from the park spotted me. He said, "Sir, can I come in with you?" "Sure," I said. "Come on."

I ordered my coffee and said, "I'll also pay for whatever he's having." He said, "I just want a cup of water," but then he put money on the counter. He said, "I'd like to buy this man's coffee."

"I don't understand; you're buying my coffee?"

"You're the pastor of that church, right?" "Yes." "You have a really nice choir." "Yes, we do." He said, "I used to sing in the choir when I was in college." "You were in college?" "Yes, until my mom got sick, and I had to drop out. But I love the music, and your custodian lets me in the balcony when the choir is rehearsing on Thursday nights. I lie in a pew and listen. Rev, it's the best part of my week. For an hour I am surrounded by beauty. Don't you love it when moments come along and you are just surrounded by beauty? So, I just want to buy you a cup of coffee and ask you to thank the singers at your church."

"I'm sorry, what's your name?" "I'm Gabriel," he said. "Your name is Gabriel?" "Yes sir. It's a name from the Bible." "Gabriel, would you like to come and sing on Thursday?" "Oh no," he said. "I don't sing anymore, but I love to listen. Tell them last week's anthem by Rutter is one of my favorites. Enjoy your coffee." And he disappeared into the crowd.

I served a church that was surrounded by unhoused people. We engaged in the battle for a better day, but it was more than we could change. Addressing the need left us feeling inadequate. With each passing year, it felt like we were losing ground. And yet sometimes we get a glimpse of a new day that is surely coming, a day when we will be surrounded by beauty. I thought I walked into Starbucks, but I met an Easter angel who was actually named Gabriel, and he showed me that beauty has not died. The resurrected one continues to call us forward. Often the victories of love are modest, but love will win.

In the prologue to Hans Kung's book *On Being a Christian*, he says, "This book was written not because the author thinks he is a good Christian, but because he thinks that being a Christian is a particularly good thing."¹ Easter calls us to pay attention to this particularly good thing. In this broken world, we do the good that is ours to do, share the love that is ours to share, and let God do with that what God will do. Sometimes it will fail miserably. But sometimes there will be victories, maybe hundredfold. Or maybe thirtyfold. But even modest victories bear witness that the fragile power of love is persistent. It endures all things, as Paul says.

Ben Comen ran cross country at Hannah High School, near Anderson, South Carolina. Ben was always the last runner to cross the finish line, but people from across the upstate would knock off work early to go watch Ben Comen run. Ben

has cerebral palsy. It seizes the muscles and constricts his body, leaving him to lunge and falter. It would take him a better part of the morning to run the 3.1-mile race. In almost every race, he fell. It was not unusual for Ben to cross the finish line bloodied about the elbows and knees. But people would wait. And when he neared the end, they all returned to the track to cross the finish line together. Grown men watched, twisting their jaws, trying to keep the tears in their eyes and off their faces.

Why do you suppose the whole town turned out to watch a kid run who would never win? I think they watched Ben Comen because they were so much like him, or more likely, they wanted to be like him. They watched a guy who reminded them that you don't have to be particularly good at something to do a particularly good thing. You don't have to finish first to win what really matters.

The promise of Easter is that as powerful as death may be, it is not more powerful than the love of God. This holy love that calls you by name will never let you go. It is persistent. It is an undying love. It is a power, but a tender power. It is a vulnerable strength, but it lives and it calls us to live toward a promised day that we have never seen, but a day that beckons us.

So, as Easter people we do the good that is ours to do. We share the love that is ours to share, and we live toward that promised day when justice will roll down like waters. It is a day when swords will be beaten into plowshares because it will finally make more sense to us to feed one another than to kill one another. It's a promised day when the grumbling noises of hungry bellies are replaced with songs of table blessings. It's a promised day when our children grow up "to be neither the destroyers nor the destroyed."¹ We have never reached that promised day. But because the love of God does not die, this promise remains. Easter is no fairy tale. Easter does not mean we all live happily ever after, not yet. Rather Easter launches us into the battle for life transformed. The promise of Easter is not that there will be no end to us, but that there is coming a better us. That is why even in these days, we can sing with a full heart, "Jesus Christ is risen today: Alleluia."

In the walk of faith, we are sometimes clumsy, and our victories are modest. The needs of the world are overwhelming, and we feel small. The only power we have is love, and love is a tender power, and her victories are often modest. But keep trusting that holy love, and here and there, now and then, you will hear the voice of the one who has gone ahead, calling over his shoulder, "Come on. I'm right here ahead of you. Keep coming!" Alleluia!

Notes

1 Ted Friend, "Silicon Valley's Quest to Live Forever," *The New Yorker*, March 27, 2017.

2 Friend. All the information regarding "Healthy Longevity" is found in Friend's article.

3 Harris King, *On Being a Christian* (New York: Image Books, Doubleday, 1984), 20.

4 Rich Reilly, *Sports Illustrated*, 2003.

5 Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal Dreams* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 299.