

Experiencing resurrection hope in times of struggle

Believing in the resurrection seems easier on a beautiful Spring morning, when children and flowers are newly clothed in bright colors and fresh pastels. Less so when we are facing struggles and an uncertain future. The Christian community, with the help and encouragement of our consumer culture, wants to focus on Easter, and forget about the week of struggle that preceded it. In the Jewish story of the Exodus from Egypt, it is easy to focus on the moment of rescue, and then the final entry into the land of promise flowing with sweet blessings – and ignore the suffering and struggle that accompanied the departure and the journey from where they were to where they ultimately would rest.

Life is not all fresh flowers, laughing children, and abundant prosperity. I read an interesting observation recently – that dependency is our natural state. We begin and end life that way – unable to fully care for ourselves. We are all in some way “dis-abled”. The notion of being independent, autonomous, all self-sufficient persons is a myth and aberration, fleeting and ephemeral. This is not to suggest that life is bleak and hopeless. That too is a myth – the idea that dependency equals deficiency; that we are somehow less if we need others. In the life and ministry of Jesus we see one who makes himself vulnerable. Paul says in [Philippians 2:5-11](#) that Jesus “emptied himself.” The Greek word for this is *kenosis*. In Christ God chose to experience the fullness of human limitation, and thereby blessed it as holy. Whether or not God NEEDED human help, God chose to enlist and even rely upon the help, support and agency of humans, who were and are limited. We are at one time marvelously able some ways, and dis-able in others. God entered fully into this dis-abled state. God knows the road we walk, because in Jesus he has walked it with us.

There is some comfort in knowing we are not alone in our struggle. Yet this does not end or even ease our struggle. The fact that you are also sick with the flu does not lessen my symptoms. In fact, if we share life together, things become more difficult if we are both down at the same time. Ideally when one is weak, another is strong, so that we can adequately share one another’s burdens and joys.

The book [Tuesday’s With Morrie](#) by Mitch Album offers a wonderfully poignant illustration of this idea. In this story Morrie, a retired professor living (dying from?) with ALS tells Mitch, his former student turned reluctant biographer, about his own transition back to dependency. Morrie reached a point in his disease process where he could no longer perform the tasks of personal hygiene and self-care – in other words he could no longer wipe his own bottom, clearly not a condition from which he would recover. Rather than fight the humiliation and shame that often accompany this situation, Morrie chose to interpret his experience as one in which he was receiving tender, loving and compassionate care as he had in the first years of life. Think about this. Many people long for intimacy and are starved for human touch. Here Morrie is forced to receive both under less than ideal circumstances. By grace he is able to shift his attitude and thinking to humility rather than humiliation. What needs to happen in us to experience that same freedom and release from pretension?

In Morrie we see both emotional and physical struggle. He makes a mental shift that helps him receive care with a new attitude and emotional experience. But does this lessen his physical distress? Perhaps not. Yet many scientists and psychologists have demonstrated a connection between the mental, emotional, spiritual and physical experiences of being human. A positive attitude actually does ease our experience of pain, and a discouraged countenance will reduce our tolerance to hardship.

As someone who proclaims hope in the resurrection, I want to believe that suffering does not have the last word in our lives. We want to think and believe that things will get better. But sometimes they don’t. So what do we do with our hope in the resurrection and its power in our lives when things go from bad to worse? The cancer patient and his family pray and hope for treatment to work and to hear the words “remission” or “cure”. The

cardiac patient and her family likewise hope for a full recovery from surgery and return to a vibrant and active lifestyle. This is our hope and prayer. Yet we know that none of us gets out alive. We will all die someday, from something. Our hope is not to avoid dying so much as to live a long and full life, and to avoid prolonged suffering. We want 70 or 80 years or more, and then we want to go quietly in our sleep, not being a burden to others. According to the Centers for Disease Control three fourths of the US population will die following a prolonged illness or injury. The vast majority of us will not “go gently into that good night”.

When we have this conversation in a hospital or long-term care setting, we are not saying anything new. One might even ask at this moment, “Where is the word of hope?” Yes, that is precisely the point. At Easter of all times we want to hear, believe and proclaim a word of hope. Let me suggest several things that can help us experience and share resurrection **HOPE** even in times of struggle:

- 1) **H**ONESTY: Be honest about what we are experiencing. We cannot find true hope until we honestly face our real struggles, fears and even despair. This is not easy, but it is essential.
- 2) **O**PENNESS: Share our awareness. You can do this by writing in a journal or letter. You can talk with a trusted friend, confessor, or professional. We need to BOTH feel/think it and externalize it somehow.

When we do these two things, we begin to get a handle on our struggle, and gain some power over our fear and despair. This is why many spiritual traditions call for confession – naming the struggle is a form of personal agency and gives us mental, emotional, spiritual and even physical power in it. In AA this is revealed in the 4th & 5th steps. We may discover that things are not as bleak as we first believed, and that we are not alone.

- 3) **P**ROJECTION: Identify and name positive outcomes – project them into the future. Remember how Morrie reframed his experience from shame to blessing. Consider how a funeral may become a time of when people give and receive forgiveness, mercy and grace to heal old wounds. The Apostle Paul presumes to use pregnancy and the birthing process as a metaphor for struggle followed by blessing. The struggle is real, but so is the potential for positive and life-giving future. What inspiration can be found in those who face illness and death with courage, integrity and even joy?
- 4) **E**XPECTATION: Anticipate the good that can and will come. As we read in Hebrews 12:2 “looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” This theme recurs in scripture, particularly regarding the experience of Jesus and his role as our example.

It may help us to also remember that no one believed in the resurrection until they personally experienced the risen Jesus. The Apostles and disciples had been repeatedly told, along with the rulers of the people and the crowds. It is hard to experience resurrection hope during our times of struggle, hard even to hope and believe. One great blessing of walking this road is that we are then in a position to offer real hope to others because of what we have seen and known. Everyone’s experience is unique, and yet we can draw strength and hope from each other. We proclaim the Easter resurrection of Jesus each year both to remind ourselves, and to tell the world, that we might all live in hope. (Acts 2:22-28; Psalm 16) There is always room for HOPE.

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