

A promise that is not empty

I don't know about you, but I am rather weary of empty promises. You know what I mean -- those expressed by political candidates, those uttered by a family member who has one too many times bailed on you, those said by friends in whom you just simply cannot believe anymore, those institutions, including the church, that make promises for God they have no business making.

And, you know how it feels. The breaking of a promise, a promise not fulfilled, it goes beyond disappointment, beyond a sense of sadness, beyond mere frustration. It is, instead, heartbreaking because you needed to believe, you gave in to trust, and you allowed yourself to be vulnerable to another's actions. The result is not only trying to figure out how to negotiate your feelings about the other, but also how to figure out what to do with the self-exposure you wish you had not risked. That is, the breaking of a promise is at the same time both cause for a reevaluation of the one who broke the promise and of yourself -- why did I think I could believe in this person, this system, in the first place? What's wrong with me? Why couldn't I see the truth?

Then there is the recognition of the other side, when you begin to remember and realize the promises you have broken. And you know that what you feel is what you have potentially made others feel -- and that is not a good feeling. Not at all.

What does promises broken have to do with resurrection? Resurrection is a promise that was not broken, cannot be broken, will not be broken -- ever. God stakes the incarnation, God's love, God's commitment, God's very self on this promise.

Belief in God can be difficult. We're fallen human beings and there's great suffering in our world. It's easier to say "no," not believe, and to presume that everything happens by mere chance. In such a worldview, there's no effort to find meaning, or search for value, or struggle for reconciliation between a good God and a dark world. Things just happen. We're just raw participants in the ebb and flow of the world. We're only recipients of the consequences of a deterministic world.

In contrast to such a darkened worldview, however, Jesus speaks words of light. The Lord, the Morning Dawn, announces a different understanding of life. He proclaims a single God, righteous and true, who is loving and seeks out our well-being. The Lord Jesus describes life as a linear path, with a graced self-determination within each person's heart, and an opportunity for salvation through his Passion, Death, and Resurrection.

In contrast to the desolation of determinism, the Lord announces a consolation in his Cross and Resurrection. In spite of the predominant ancient and contemporary "no" to faith in a good God, the Lord

incarnates and exemplifies the power of a “yes” to a living God, abounding in goodness, and who manifests his fatherly care for all.

It is within this backdrop that we can understand the Lord’s response to the ultimatums and demands for miracles and healings. To such commotion, the Lord offers only one sign, namely, the sign of Jonah.

In Matthew’s version, we read that Jonah was in the belly of the whale for three days and three nights. This refers to Jesus in the tomb, to his death and resurrection. This is the sign that Jesus promises... the sign of Jonah is the mercy of God in Jesus Crucified and Risen for us, for our salvation.”

The sign of Jonah, therefore, is offered to all. It is a symbolic description of the Resurrection. In this solemn promise - given credibility by the disclosure of his glory in his Transfiguration before Peter, James, and John - the Lord Jesus shows the human family the possibility of an infinite fellowship with God, a blessed eternity, an everlasting place of rest and refreshment.

The goal, however, is only reached through suffering. As with the Lord, the person must be willing to live and die in the earth. The promise of Resurrection gives new hope to humanity. Once a curse, since it could not be fulfilled, hope is now a solace and an encouragement to faith. Even as life is fallen, tragedy is inevitable, and death will come for us all, hope points us to eternity. It orders our days and guides us in finding

meaning, value, and purpose in the trials and throes, triumphs and treasures of life. The Resurrection allows life to become an amazing journey, and no longer a barren repetition of nothing.

If there is just one thing that we might remember about resurrection, one thing we need to hear on the last Sunday of the season of Easter before the summer's scattering, one thing that maybe you need to remember as you wind up another Easter season? Resurrection is promise -- plain and simple. There are a lot of empty promises that make up our lives, but resurrection isn't one of them. And some days, perhaps many days, all we need is one promise we know won't be broken to make it through the day.

We might say, well, of course, that's all well and good. You are stating the obvious. But think about it. What difference might it make that at the end of the day, this is a promise that is real; that when no one else comes through, God does; when there seems to be little to count on, you can count on resurrection -- for both your future and your present.

Resurrection is often relegated to a belief of the church to which we simply comply and that which we by rote confess. We go through the motions each Easter, each time the creed is said, but how often do we stop and say that resurrection makes a difference for how I live my day today? What might it feel like to know that the promise of the resurrection is mine now?

I think that's in part what Jesus is praying for -- for the disciples to be able to hear that his resurrection is a promise to believe in. I suspect that Paul and Silas weren't just praying to God for something to do to pass the time in prison. Rescue from prisons, rescue from death, are promises God makes and God comes through. Why? "Because Light dawns for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart" (Psalm 97).

Time and time again I have seen God take bad situations in my life or that of others and use those bad situations to bring good from them. I've seen God do that when people have lost loved ones, when their marriages failed, when they lost jobs, when they sought to end their lives, when injuries were sustained, and when all hope was lost. Easter reminds us that there is nothing that God cannot use to bring about good, if only we let Him and give Him time to do so. Countless times it has been my faith in God's ability to do this which has enabled me to hang on. It has been the hope I have encouraged others to hold on to on many an occasion.

What this hope is, of course, is nothing less than "the promise of resurrection." God's resurrection power was not available to only Jesus. The Bible makes it clear that this power is the possession of all of God's children. (Philippians 3:10) We just need to be reminded of this from time to time. So perhaps that's what spring is all about. As Martin Luther indicated, "in every leaf in springtime" we find a reminder of the promise of resurrection. I thought about that this morning when I drove

into the church parking lot. Earlier this winter I had photographed a dogwood bud encased in ice right next to our parking lot. This morning that bud was a beautiful flower. It had not only survived the cold dark winter, it was thriving. It was alive.

On this 7th Sunday of Easter I encourage you to rejoice in and give thanks for the glorious resurrection of Christ our Lord. I also ask you to keep in mind that the good news of Jesus' resurrection is not ancient history. It is as fresh as the blossoms you see around you today.

So, what if I preach that resurrection is promise, is my promise, is your promise? That it is a given. It's the one thing you can count on. How does that change your present? How does that shape how you live? How does that influence your own promises to others?

This latter section of Jesus' prayer in John is a clue to what the resurrection promise might mean. Here, Jesus prays for those who have yet to believe. God loves the world you see, but how can the world know this promise that will indeed be kept without us living this resurrection promise daily? That is, God counts on us to embody God's promise in a world of broken ones. God needs us to give witness to the ultimate promise kept when our experience, when we only know empty promises. God invites us to live in the promise that is truly ours forever -- that is the resurrection difference.

One of the lessons that I cherish most from thinking over the meaning of Easter, is the promise of resurrection.

Jesus Christ had his resurrection from being crucified, leaving a legacy that has blessed humanity for all time to come. He proved that his Life was God, in Spirit, and could not be killed. That we all have this Life to claim and reflect as children of God. That no evil power can take it away from us, nor can this Life be materially lost.

Hopefully, none of us are crucified on a cross as Jesus was, but “crucifixions” can appear in our experience in other ways, for instance in the form of an enemy threatening to harm us financially, socially or politically. Or on a personal level such as struggling with a life-threatening disease, an addiction, or bouts of depression.

Whenever faced with what seems to be a “big problem,” we can gain traction over that problem by remembering that God is bigger. God is our Life, too, just like God was the Life of Jesus.

The same power that sustained Jesus and resurrected him from the grave, is at work in us and able to heal us.

So, never lose hope. You are not alone. God is with you. Christ is in you.

Accept the possibility of resurrection in your life.

You are worthy of healing. It’s the promise of Easter.