

Nov. 1, 2020 All Saints Day  
BEING Resurrected—Reboot: Reset, Refresh, Renew  
Rev. 7:9-17 and 1 John 3:1-3

We have wrapped up our 40 day challenge and it has been rewarding. We have spent a week each looking at what Jesus says about being, forgiving, serving, giving and going. I have learned and grown and I know you have too. My only complaint is that it didn't last long enough. Over the next 5 months, we are going to be adding on to what we have learned by spending a month on each of the 5 topics and looking at ways to reboot, reset, refresh or renew them in our lives.

We spend the month of November on Being. This is All Saints Day, a day we set aside to think about heaven and its occupants. So we start tonight by looking Being Resurrected with Jesus.

Let's start this way. What would it be like, do you suppose, if a person could lose his or her fear of death? By that, I mean what if that dark at the end of the tunnel that awaits every one of us ceased to be something that we dreaded and avoided and was looked on rather as a portal, the beginning of a new adventure?

I got a glimpse into an answer to that question some years ago by reading a very little known play by Eugene O'Neill entitled "Lazarus Laughed." I'm told that it was not a commercial success. In fact, it closed just a week after it opened on Broadway years ago. However, as I read this I was deeply moved because I believe O'Neill has put his finger on the functional significance of this day that we celebrate just now.

The play begins, or picks up, where the Biblical story leaves off. You may remember that Lazarus was the friend that Jesus called back from the dead. He'd been buried for four whole days when Jesus came to the village of Bethany, had the stone rolled back from the tomb, and gave him back the gift of life. As the curtain goes up, Lazarus is seen stumbling out of the dark, blinking into the sunlight. And after the grave clothes are taken off of him he begins to laugh a gentle, soft laugh; nothing bitter, nothing derisive, an embracing, astonishing, welcoming sound. The very first thing he does is to embrace Jesus with gratitude. Then he begins to embrace his sisters and the other people who were gathered there.

He has a very clear look in his eye, nothing far away. It's as if he's seeing the world about him for the very first time. He reaches over and pats the earth very affectionately. He looks up at the sky, at the trees, at the neighbors as if he had never seen them before, as if he is overwhelmed by the incredible alrightness of the way everything is. The very first words he utters are the words, "Yes, yes, yes," as if to embrace reality as it is being discovered all over again.

In the play he makes his way back to his house and the whole village of Bethany is awash with wonder. Finally somebody gets the courage to ask what was on everybody's mind. "Lazarus, tell us what it's like to die. What lies on the other side of this boundary that none of us have crossed?"

At that point, Lazarus begins to laugh even more intensely and then he says, "There is no death, really. There is only life. There is only God. There is only incredible joy." He continues, "Death is not the way it appears from this side. Death is not an abyss into which we go into chaos. It is, rather, a portal through which we move into everlasting growth and everlasting life." He then says, "The One that meets us there is the same generosity that gave us our lives in the beginning, the One who gave us our birth. Not because we deserved it but because that generous One wanted us to be and therefore there is nothing to fear in the next realm. The grave is as empty as a doorway is empty. It is a portal through which we move into greater and finer life. Therefore, there is nothing to fear. Our great agenda is to learn to accept, to learn to trust. We are put here to learn to love more fully. There is only life. There is no death." And with that his laughter began to fill the whole house in which he was staying.

Well, Lazarus, in the play, goes back to his daily tasks and yet there is something different. He is now a non-anxious person. He is no longer vulnerable to that fear that diminishes the vitality of life. The house where he lives became known as the "House of Laughter," and night after night, you would hear singing and dancing. And the spirit of this one who had come back with this message that there is nothing to fear began to spread throughout the whole little village. The quality of work began to rise all over Bethany. People began to live more humanely and more generously with each other. There did not seem to be the old occasion for conflicts that there had used to be. In fact, a joy settled over this whole little

community because someone had come back saying that there was finally nothing to fear.

However, not everyone in Bethany was pleased with this turn of events. The Roman authorities were quick to sense that this one who had lost his fear of death was, in fact, a threat to the kind of control that they liked to maintain. You realize, of course, that the key to intimidation is always that incipient fear of death. The way a tyrant holds someone down is by always suggesting that if they don't obey then something terrible, like death, would be used against them. One of the cruelest of all the Roman emperors, a man named Caligula, used to say, "Crosses and corpses are so educational. Let the scum see their blood or the blood of some of their kin and it will so cower them in fear that then we can rule them." So the Romans were past masters at intimidation and Lazarus represented a real threat. How do you intimidate someone who is no longer afraid of death? In the play, the Roman authorities move in on Lazarus. They tell him to quit laughing. They tell him his house can no longer be the occasion of parties and all he does is to laugh all the more. "The truth is," he says, "there is nothing you can do to me. There is no death. There is only life." The Romans were so frustrated that they arrest him. They take him to Caesarea where he appears before a higher official, but he's not able to do anything with Lazarus. And so, in the play, he is taken all the way to Rome.

The play ends as he stands face to face with the Roman emperor. Here is the man who is allegedly the most powerful of all on earth. He says to Lazarus, "You have a choice. You'll either stop this infernal laughter right this minute or I'm going to have you put to death." And Lazarus continued to laugh.

He says to the emperor, "Go ahead and do what you will. There is no death. There is only life."

The play ends with a man who is no longer afraid of death actually being more powerful than the one who ruled all of the Roman Empire. Now it seems to me that Eugene O'Neill has put his finger here on the functional significance of Resurrection and eternal life. Because, you see, when Jesus came back from the grave he had the same message to give us as Lazarus gave when he came forth from the tomb in the play.

When Jesus emerged on Easter Sunday, His first words were, "Be not afraid." He, too, would say, "There is only life. There is only laughter. There is only the joy and the mercy of God." Jesus came, according to St. Paul, to abolish death and to give human beings the hope of everlasting life. It is that sense that we no longer have to be afraid of the dark at the end of the tunnel that can have such incredible impact not just on life after death, but on life before death and life after birth. I'm not sure that any of us realize the degree to which the fear of death is at the root of so many of the fears that sap the vitality of our lives.

There is this primal terror that what awaits us at the end of our journey is nothing but chaos or even judgment or punishment. Homer, the ancient poet, put it quite succinctly. He said, "Death is that thing that destroys what we call life and who can remove the terror of it?"

Well, the answer is, "Jesus can." He came back from the grave on Easter Sunday and said to us that there is nothing we can do to make God love us any more than God already loves us and nothing we can do to make God stop loving us. If the killing of God's beloved Son did not break the affection that God had for creation, then we can be sure that God's goodness and mercy is greater than anything we have done or failed to do. Therefore the fear of death is replaced by that sense of adventure that we experience as we pass across into the next realm. The grave is empty like a door is empty. It is a way to the next part of God's grand adventure. The great message of Easter is there is nothing to fear because of the nature of God's love.

I believe this is what Resurrection can do for us. It tells us that the love of God is bigger than anything we have done or failed to do; that we are given eternal life on the same terms we were given our birth not because we deserve it because God's grace wants to give it to us. Therefore this week I hope, as you live in resurrection—that is, after all, part of your being--, you will see the good pleasure of the Father giving you life everlasting. And I hope your answer will be the same words that Lazarus uttered as he came out of the tomb, "Yes, yes, yes." Because if we want more of life, it is the Father's good pleasure to give it to us. Hallelujah. Christ is Risen!