

“LO I TELL YOU A MYSTERY!”

1 Corinthians 15:51-58 - June 12-13, 2010

Leo Tolstoy, once asked himself, “What will come of what I am doing today or tomorrow? What will come of my whole life? Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything?”
Leo Tolstoy *“Confessions”*

It can also be expressed this way: Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?

Some people approach you and me and say. “I really struggle with this aspect of Christian teaching. I like this part of Christian belief, but I don’t think I can accept that part.” “If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all he said; if he didn’t rise from the dead, then why worry about any of what he said? The issue on which everything hangs is not whether you like his teaching, but whether or not he rose from the dead.”

That is how the first hearers felt who heard reports of the resurrection. They knew that if it was true it meant we can’t live our lives any way we want. It also meant we don’t have to be afraid of anything, not Roman swords, not cancer, nothing. If Jesus rose from the dead it changes everything.

The message of the resurrection is that this world matters! That the injustices and pains of this present world must now be addressed with the news, that healing, justice, and love have won. If Easter means Jesus Christ is only raised in a spiritual sense, then it is only about me, and finding a new dimension in my personal spiritual life. But if Jesus is truly risen from the dead, Christianity becomes good news for the whole world, news which warms our hearts precisely because it isn’t about just warming our hearts.

So Paul uses the word mystery. Seldom do we use the word mystery correctly. We use it to speak of a muddle, or a riddle, or something difficult to understand, or a point of illogic, but we seldom use the word “mystery” in its true full bodied sense.

Paul, however, does. A mystery is something beyond human comprehension-as the Wednesday Bible class demonstrated so magnificently in our discussion on Wednesday. Not just difficult to figure out, but impossible to understand. A mystery is not something that can be seen clearly with a little more light or a better lens, but something so holy, so awesome, and inscrutable that, were we to turn every halogen lamp in the world on it and turn it every conceivable way under the best optics available, it would remain ultimately unknowable.

In this sense, a “murder mystery” is a misnomer; it is just a story that resists an easy solution. The real mystery story starts with a creation out of nothing by a God who will not be named; climaxed in the coming into creation of creation’s God in the form of a creature; and culminates in this incarnate God’s crucifixion and resurrection from the dead. That’s a mystery, and Paul knows it, which is why he says, “Lo, I tell you a mystery!”

It is appropriate to dwell on this mystery today, when the lilies of Easter have wilted and the crowds have dispersed, and we have entered into the long green season after Pentecost. Pentecost is that time of year when the church goes green. The Spirit of God that is at work transforming our lives into Gospel lives...Evidenced by the story of the woman in the Gospel reading.

“Lo, I tell you a mystery!” Paul unfolds a tale of utter incomprehensibility, of death and resurrection, of transformation from mortal to immortality in the twinkling of an eye, of flesh that rots changing into imperishability. We are bound to confront this story where we live most of the time, without the bravado of Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus” to sustain us.

The quote of a poet goes like this, “Death and the sun are not to be looked at in the face.” Christianity does try to look death in the face, and Christianity sees only the mystery of the resurrection.

A major challenge we face as Christians is to get the analogy right when we speak of the resurrection. Many people think that resurrection is “like” or “analogous to” the resuscitation of a dead or apparently dead body.

Thus every situation from the biblical story of Lazarus being brought back to life to the story of saving a child’s life who has fallen into a swimming pool becomes a resurrection analogy. In fact, as amazing as it is to resuscitate a dead or near dead person and as miraculous as it was for Jesus to bring Lazarus back, these kinds of incidents do not get at the utter impossibility, the uniqueness, and the mystery of the resurrection. Both Lazarus and the child will die again. Resurrection means that death will die!

The analogy of resurrection is not resuscitation, but creation out of nothing. According to Paul, the body created out of nothing has continuity with the body that existed before death. Finally the Nicene Creed throws up its hands and confesses simply, with eyes still smarting from looking too long into the light, “We look for the resurrection from the dead.”

“Lo, I tell you a mystery!” Beyond belief, beyond the boundaries of mere possibility and impossibility, far from the shores of the conceivable. That which God created out of nothing, God did not create in vain. That which God created out of nothing, God recreates, resurrects from the dead.

Death, be not proud, though some have called you mighty and dreadful, for you are not so;

For those who think you do overthrow,

Die not poor death, not yet can you kill me.

One short sleep past, we wake eternally,

And death shall be no more. Death thou shalt die!

W. H. Auden, if anything, is even more personal than Donne when he writes:

Nothing shall save us that is possible;

We who must die demand a miracle.

When someone says they cannot believe in the resurrection because it is an impossibility, contradicting logic and science, they are not far from understanding the whole point. But they need to press on.

If we can believe that everything was created out of nothing, than believing that God can again create everything out of nothing, is a piece of cake. Resurrection is a second, new creation, quite as inconceivable as the first. Anything more conceivable and less impossible would not be adequate. "We who must die, demand a miracle." And so Paul writes, "Lo, I tell you a mystery! "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

Perhaps we should pause, if only for a moment. While not taking anything away from Paul's victory lap, perhaps we should note that even in God's victory over death, there is a little sting left in the old scorpion's tail. Even a dead scorpion can still sting. We may not feel the sting of death when we think of our own deaths, but death still stings when we think of the death of those we love. Perhaps Paul understood this. He affirms our grief; we just do not grieve like those who have no hope.

We have hope because we know that nothing entrusted to the God of creation and resurrection can be lost forever, even in death.

"Lo, I tell you a mystery!" I tell you a mystery, because nothing less will do.

Resurrection is not a private spiritual high that I can enjoy in the security of my own privileged way of life. It is coming to live, die and be transformed in the life of a people and a bodily world that God indwells as Creator, Provider, and Redeemer. Every time we break bread and share the cup at the Lord's table, or celebrate the baptism of an infant or adult, we participate in the pattern of life, death and transformation that prefigures God's gift of resurrection life. The gracious God of King David, and the God of the woman who responded to Jesus love and forgiveness enabled her to demonstrate her love of Jesus in her transformed life. Your sins are forgiven you! That word transforms and forms our life in the realization of how gracious God has been to us.. Since this God through the ages has sustained the people of Israel and the church, despite persecution, oppression, destruction and temptation, we have reason to hope that we will come face to face with our Lord Jesus Christ and with all God's creatures in a new creation.

I will never forget the words of a five year old boy by the name of Andrew. His grandfather, Louis was in a new member class. At the end of the class he was baptized and became a member of the community of faith called Messiah. But during that time he also discovered that he had lung cancer. He died shortly after his Baptism. His youngest grandson, Andrew was deeply impacted by his grandpa's death, but he knew of the resurrection. One day he asked his mother, how he would be able to find his grandfather among all the people in heaven? After thinking about it for a while, he came up with this

great statement. “I know what I will do when I get to heaven. I will go and stand by Jesus, because grandpa will be standing next to him. Behold I tell you a mystery!

Joy in the Christ Life, David E. Hinck, FGS