

Easter Sunday

04 April 2021

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In our Gospel reading today, Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of James, and Salome, in grieving their friend, after just having witnessed their Lord suffer upon the cross, now go to anoint and prepare a corpse for burial. I want to highlight this. They are going to console their grief by preparing a body for death, the only thing that they can do. For them, in that moment their only consolation can be preparing the corpse their friend to honour the death of a martyr. It is their only consolation, the only thing they know to do.

In the same way, I think these three women, before they encounter the resurrected Christ, are so much like us and our world, which seeks to make peace with the reality of death, to accept death which we are told is normal, to create a level of tolerance for the cold and seemingly unyielding power it has over us and our world.

I have recently been reading *The Religion of the Future*, by the Brazilian public intellectual and philosopher Roberto Mangabeira Unger.¹ He makes the argument that we need to a new type of religion that does not seek to offer us a *consolation* to the fact of the death. I find this to be an odd statement, since the relationship to death is the primary of impetus even the foundation of his *new* approach to religion, he sees throughout the whole of life the suffering and in his words the *belittling* of the human condition. Life is, in a sense, a lot of little deaths. He understands *death*, which is also manifest in the limitations and sufferings of human life, as problems that are unavoidable, its power inescapable. His goal is to propose a new worldview, grounded in a new way of life. To use his words, where we “die only once?”² His vision is of a shared collective effort to create a healthy, virtuous society, where through human flourishing where we all become as Gods enabled as much as possible, realize our fullest potential, is a liberation withing the limits of death, to replace the *consolation* of heaven?

From my perspective, there is really nothing new or surprising here, no new tools with which to build a meaningful life in today’s world, no relevant weaponry to battle the reality of suffering, our limitations.

It merely draws from and can be considered alongside those *Death of God* philosophies, from Friedrich Nietzsche of 19th century, all the way to the theologies of 1960s and 1970s, which essentially sought to find meaning, and in some cases community, in the absence of God. Such perspectives would, I presume, view our gathering here today as an understandable, yet sad and great foolishness, a pathology of the human condition, a group attempting to find *consolation* and hope in an Easter story of the Resurrection.

St. Paul himself must have faced these charges. He must have understood them all too well. Recall his words in 1 Corinthians:

¹ Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *The Religion of the Future* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

² Unger, *Religion of the Future*, 34.

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'³

From a Christian perspective, it is Unger and thinkers like him I mentioned earlier that are seeking to *console* us, for they are always seeking to get us to accept that we are stuck, that the human condition is a sort of revised combination of Good Friday and Holy Saturday. Although these days can neither be truly *good* nor *holy*, because these are not days that a Saviour has died to overcome death, but are rather merely the repeated days where the cycles of injustice and death are the only constant. Understood in this way, death becomes a sad and weary certainty. And in response, we must seek to wrestle control of the rest of *our* lives and to make them as meaningful as possible.

And so, now we must return to the question at beginning of our Gospel reading posed by Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of James, and Salome, our question: "*Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?*"⁴ Their question, like Unger's, is rooted in a certainty about the power of death and a foreknowledge of what they expect to witness.

But what they encounter is not something that consoles them. *It causes alarm.*

Take note of the words of Scripture today:

As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.! ... So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid!⁵

The overcoming of death, in Jesus Christ, is not a consolation. Like those women experienced, it is dizzying and disorienting. It turns our understanding of what is possible upside down and our sense of who we are inside out. The resurrection overcomes death, and in doing so, every destructive predictable and pattern in our life to which we cling as a consolation.

The truth of the resurrection, yes, can seem a foolishness, because it challenges and confronts our understanding of what is possible from all sides. If death is overcome, then all things are possible. We are out of excuses. There is no longer reason to fear.

This is quite far from a consolation. For if Christ has vanquished death, if the death and its power would cease to have control over us, then what would that mean for lives? What would it mean for world?

Think of the story of Peter who after denying Jesus three times, is on his way to Galilee. Peter's cowardice must now turn to courage. These women who found the empty tomb eventually must proclaim what they have seen, even if no one wants to listen. Like with them, the

³ 1 Cor 1:18-19.

⁴ Mark 16:3.

⁵ Mark 16:5, 8.

resurrection shakes us. It challenges us. It confronts us with the power, the frightening power, and frightening demands of everlasting life found in the person Jesus Christ.

To close, Christianity, properly understood, does not accept the charges placed upon our faith by Unger or thinkers like him, nor does it recognize or accept the death and power it holds over the world as *normal*!

Brothers and sisters, the good news of Easter Sunday, that we proclaim tells us new life does await in Jesus Christ. Now. Today. The tomb has been rolled away. Death and death-dealing-logic has been vanquished. There is only life, and life everlasting in Christ Jesus. Our Lord is not a martyr. He does not lie waiting behind the tomb. The resurrected Christ has gone before us in words of the man at the tomb: 'has gone ahead, he has promised to meet us there!'⁶

God has spoken in the person of Jesus Christ and he has said *yes* even while we have said *no*. It is this *yes* that we must accept, to give us power, to live that reality now in a vision of a Kingdom that is not of this world and can never die. No authoritarian ruler can deliver it to us. No power can extinguish it.

What an amazing message for us today, for us who have, perhaps, settled into a new normal of isolation during COVID! Although weary of lockdowns and restrictions that, perhaps, we also do not feel ready to enter into a world awaiting us, like a prisoner returning to society after a long sentence, or like the women at the tomb, we may even be alarmed, anxious, or even terrified or afraid at what is to come.

We need to be reminded that true Christian faith, when properly understood, does not seek to merely to offer consolation to our weeping. It challenges us to go forward through an encounter with the resurrected Christ that turns our weeping into joy, to go forth, to believe, and to proclaim and live the good news: The tomb is empty! He is not to be found there!

Returning again to the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians:

Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"⁷

Christos Anesti! Christ is risen!

⁶ Mark 16:7.

⁷ 1 Cor 15:54-55.