Easter, 2024

OSP [9:00 & 11:00]

One might presume

 that a responsible homilist

charged with the daunting task

of preaching the most important feast of the Church year

would prepare for this awesome ministry

by pouring over the readings and ritual texts

 consulting appropriate biblical and liturgical commentaries

 constructing a meaningful interpretation of the mystery

 And then look for ways of assuring us that if we live well

 Resurrection is our undeniable and well-earned future.

While that chronology makes sense to me

 it seldom works out that way in the winding path

that typically characterizes my homily preparation.

 One contributing factor is that, having taught

 and preached this feast for five decades

 the biblical and liturgical text

 are familiar and trusted friends.

 More crucial for me, however,

 is that the solemnity of Easter proclaims a mystery

 that is larger than the feast and extends well beyond today

 a mystery not simply focused on the future

 but rather relentlessly confronting the present.

Let’s be honest: mysteries cannot be explained though many try

 from well-intentioned homilists to fool hearty theologians.

 In his novel [Saint Francis](https://www.amazon.com/Saint-Francis-Nikos-Kazantzakis/dp/0829421297), author Nikos Kazantzakis

 puts this Easter reflection on the lips of the poor man of Assisi

 “every year at Easter I used to watch Christ's Resurrection

 all the faithful would gather around his tomb and ...

 weep inconsolably, beating on the ground to make it open

 and behold, in the midst of lamentation the tombstone

 crumbled to pieces …

 Christ sprang from the earth and ascended to heaven.

 There was only one year I did not see him resurrected;

 that year a theologian of consequence,

 a graduate of the university of Bologna came to us

 he mounted the pulpit and began to elucidate the resurrection

 for hours on end;

 he explained … until our heads began to swim

 and that year the tombstone did not crumble

 and I swear to you no one saw the resurrection.”

 Ouch! Good thing I am neither a theologian of consequence

 nor a graduate of the University of Bologna.

 Rather, I am a believer like you

 who struggles to embrace the incomprehensible

 to live in the midst of ambiguity and too much suffering

 and is still willing to wager my faith on the resurrection.

 Or in the words of my sainted mother, after we buried Dad:

 “it had all better be true.”

 Like her, I am counting on that.

Recently I have been reading a [provocative biography](https://www.amazon.com/Einstein-Life-Universe-Walter-Isaacson/dp/0743264746)

of Albert Einstein.

 if you know anything about his personal life

 you might not think that this subversive genius

 is an appropriate reference in an Easter homily

or any other for that matter.

 He was a professed religious non-believer

 did not accept the idea of life after death

 and commented “one life is enough for me.”

Still I find Einstein a refreshing guide

 when contemplating mysteries:

 something he single-mindedly did his entire life.

What fascinates a non-scientist like me

 is that he tackled the mysteries of physics

essentially through mind-experiments

 as there existed at the time no equipment or laboratories

 that could empirically prove his theories.

 At the age of 16 he imagined chasing a beam of light:

 scientific daydreaming that contributed immensely

 to his theory of relativity.

 Then there were all those thought experiments

 about rapidly moving trains

 and elevators accelerating through space.

What is most astounding for me

 is that such exercises of the mind

 required virtually no new empirical data.

 Einstein largely excavated what was already known

 Imaginatively rearranged it

 and voila – astounding truths were revealed.

Now at this point, some of you might be wondering

 if I am suggesting that resurrection is a mind experiment

 similar to those that brought Einstein to the theory of relativity:

 the simple answer is no.

 Resurrection is not a mind experiment

 but I do believe it is a heart experiment:

 an idea from Einstein himself.

When reflecting on his vocation he wrote:

*“The state of mind which enables [one] to do work of this kind ... is akin to that of the religious worshipper or the lover; the daily effort comes from no deliberate intention or program, but straight from the heart."[[1]](#endnote-1)*

 This heart experiment we call Easter was birthed

in the early community

 bequeathed to us through the scriptures

 and rebirthed over the centuries

 through rituals and symbols, frescoes and chants.

In it, the community took what they already knew

that their Rabbi was anointed with God’s spirit

 he went about doing good

 was a source of healing and enlightenment

 and was unjustly executed on the jib of a tree

 as Peter well summarizes in the first reading.

In the wake of that violent execution

the resilient Spirit of the Only-Begotten

which had confronted them for the 3 years

he walked among them

 re-posessed their hearts

 prodding them to fresh believing

that he was risen from the dead:

 something none of them witnessed.

Yep, Renaissance paintings to the contrary

no one witnessed the rising of God’s Son:

a point underscored in today’s Gospel

 replete with tales about an apostolic foot race

 an empty tomb,

 rearranged burial cloths

 and little understanding.

What is strikingly absent is the Risen One.

Simply put, Jesus never shows up

 though Easter has already dawned.

While not exactly a spoiler alert

 in the Easter tales unfolding over the next 7 weeks

 the Risen Christ **IS** revealed

but only and persistently through personal encounters:

* With Mary of Magdala in the garden
* Then the apostolic fraidy-cats hiding in the back of the Jerusalem Hilton
* Surprising the couple that had resigned from discipleship and was returning to the abandoned fig shop in Emmaus
* Brilliantly culminating in the beach picnic with demoralized Peter, trying to recover the art of fishing which he obviously had lost.

 This dynamic of encountering the Spirit of the Risen Christ

 not only ignited the original heart experiment we call Easter

 but fuels its enduring power.

 And it endures because Resurrection and Easter

 Are siblings but not synonyms.

 Christ’s Resurrection was a once and for all event.

 Easter, on the other hand, is not a date on the calendar

 but an abiding spirituality lavished upon us in baptism

 when, as Paul reminds us, we were raised with Christ.

 The enduring mystery of Easter is that we can still encounter

 the Risen Lord.

 Welcome to Eucharist!

In his unsettling “Manifesto”

 Wendell Berry raised his prophetic voice against all things

 that disable us from encountering the Risen One

and alienate us from our baptismal legacy.

 He rails against all those **un-Easter** tendencies, when writing:

… every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.

Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what we
have not encountered we have not destroyed.

Ask the questions that have no answers.
Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.

and in a final summation he bluntly advises: Practice resurrection.

The followers of Jesus practiced resurrection

 and their dogged commitment to living an Easter spirituality

 and pass it on from one generation to the next

– usually at great cost –

 is why we stand missioned to practice resurrection today.

Unfortunately in this moment it seems there are

too many who prefer practicing crucifixion, played out in

the starvation ravaging across the Sudan & Congo

 the violence rampaging across the streets

 of Ramallah and Chicago

Thus I fear that without our commitment

 to metaphorically practicing resurrection

to extending the Easter through our embodiment

 of the justice vision

and dignity affirming spirit of the Risen Christ

Then Golgotha will only amplify

the innocent will continue to be annihilated

and the easter mystery will fade into a nostalgic memory.

Richard Powers’s novel *Bewilderment*

 features 9 year old Robin

 the warm, kindhearted son of a widowed astrobiologist

 who suffers from several neurodivergent conditions.

 His mental deterioration is a descent into hell.

 In an effort to keep him off psychoactive drugs,

 the father turns to an experimental neurofeedback treatment

 to bolster Robin’s emotion control;

 The twist is that this treatment uses a scan of his

deceased mother’s brain, her preserved emotional state

 to enable Robin to recover his wellbeing.

 The neural mapping of his Mother’s emotional legacy

 not only calms her son but recreates him,

rescues him from emotional hell

resurrects his well-being.

 the lead neuroscientist notes:

*Well-being is a virus. One self-assured person at home in this world can infect dozens of others. [Who] Wouldn’t … want to see an epidemic of infectious well-being.*

Today’s eucharist is not an exercise in neural- but in Jesus- feedback

that summons us to embrace the “Jesus virus”

 to recalibrate us

for practicing resurrection in a world

 too often hell-bent on crucifixion.

MUSIC

In his poem “Easter Communion,”

Gerard Manley Hopkins

cajoles us to “Breathe Easter now.”

Our prayer this solemn feast is that with expanded lungs,

we might inhale the intoxication of the Easter gift

and exhale it through our relentless resurrectional practicing

so that the Easter mystery becomes an epidemic

 of grace, and hope, and peace

for the glory of God, and the salvation of the world,

Through Christ, the Risen one, forever and ever.

1. From "Principles of Research," a speech delivered at Max Planck's 60th birthday celebration, 1918; published in *Mein Weltbild*, by Albert Einstein (Amsterdam: Querido Verlag, 1934); reprinted in *Ideas and Opinions*, by Albert Einstein (New York: Crown, 1954), pp. 224-227. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)