

DISPELLING THE FOG
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In 1815, Wellington confronted Napoleon at Waterloo as the English and French armies met in battle. Home in England, the people awaited news of the result. The message was relayed from the battleground across the continent and across the English Channel by a series of semaphore or flag signals. When the last signalman on top of the dome of Westchester Cathedral was receiving the message, fog was rolling in. Quickly, he relayed the message to the ground, W-E-L-L-I-N-G-T-O-N D-E-F-E-A-T-E-D. The signalman could see no longer for the fog. As the news spread among the waiting and hopeful people that Wellington had been defeated, despair also spread. Finally, though, when the fog lifted, the signalman was able to complete the message with the words T-H-E E-N-E-M-Y. "Wellington defeated the enemy." With that, a great cry arose because victory had been procured and the enemy had been vanquished.

Suppose today we replaced Wellington's name with that of Jesus. How many of us read the message to say, "Jesus defeated?" How many of us live our lives as if the fog had never lifted, as if Jesus had been vanquished, rather than the enemy? As if there was Good Friday but no Easter?

Of all the things we read about in Holy Scriptures and speak of in the church, none is harder to believe than the Resurrection. Christmas seemed so easy. It was happy and fun. It spoke of earthly things: a baby and ecstatic parents, a stable, shepherds, Magi. The story seemed so quaint that the secular world has taken it to its heart and celebrates it vigorously, even if the meaning of incarnation, the Word made flesh, is obscured and ignored.

Jesus' life is a little harder to believe, but Jesus' teachings for the most part seem nice and innocuous. The hard lessons are easy to rationalize away, or simply to ignore. Even miracles are easy to deal with by either ignoring them or taking them purely at face value and missing their meaning.

And what of Jesus death? It wasn't pleasant, but easy to understand and believe. It isn't something we like to talk about. We don't like to speak about sin and hatred and cruelty and death, but after all, these matters happened long ago. They concern people of history long dead and so crucifixion isn't too hard to believe in. We just polish up our crosses and make them beautiful, even pieces of decorative jewelry.

But - what about the Resurrection? The message is not hidden, and it is very clear. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!ⁱ We cannot put it aside. We cannot ignore it. The Resurrection permeates all parts of the gospel message. Indeed, it is the Resurrection which makes it good news. And so, it is preached from every pulpit, represented in symbols, sung about in hymns, but so hard to believe, so incredible.

How do we deal with this incredible claim, this embarrassment to the modern mind? Can we sentimentalize it like we have his birth at Christmas? Do we rationalize it and explain it away like we do his teachings? Well, I do not wish to explain it away, nor can I, because it is true. As incredible and difficult as it is, I believe in the Resurrection. I believe, as the Creeds proclaim, "In Jesus Christ, the Man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord."ⁱⁱ I believe that Jesus was "crucified, dead, and was buried," but "on the third day he rose again" from the dead.ⁱⁱⁱ I believe in the testimony of Simon Peter, an apostle and an eyewitness, who says to us that "God raised [Christ] on the third day and made him manifest...to those who were chosen by God as witnesses."^{iv} I believe that "Jesus Christ is Risen Today! Hallelujah!"

Nevertheless, so many, even myself, seem to live at least some of the time as if the fog had not lifted, as if Jesus was defeated. Why is this?

Could it not be that to accept the defeat of the enemy, I must first recognize the presence of an enemy? If I am to accept the Resurrection, then I must accept the necessity of the cross. To accept the forgiveness of sins, I must recognize that I am a sinner. To accept my personal Resurrection, I must face my own personal death. To be filled with hope, I must admit the emptiness of despair. To use the words of Peter, If I believe that "God raised [Christ] on the third day," I must also believe that "[Christ] is the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead," to be my judge.^v

It is so much easier to be a Christmas person and to worship a helpless baby. Or to follow a righteous Teacher who goes around doing good and making me feel good. Or even to cry at the Cross once a year than it is to admit that Jesus Christ is risen. That would make a difference. That would mean that all the rest would take on a profound and radical meaning, which couldn't be sentimentalized and rationalized. It would judge the world, you and me. It would reveal the darkness of our lives and the power of evil, death and despair that engulf us and from which there is no escape or hope, unless there is a miracle - no, not just a miracle but the miracle, the miracle of God - Resurrection.

But now we have come full circle. The miracle which judges us, the Resurrection, is also the same miracle, which frees us and brings us hope. The Risen Christ is not only the judge, but also the Saviour.

Suppose then for a moment that the fog lifted and we read in a clear, undeniable way the words, "Jesus defeated the enemy," what difference would it make?

It would dispel the power of evil and free us from the bonds of sin. No longer would our lives be under the veil of guilt. No longer would our lives be clouded by the dark moments and events of the past period. God's forgiving Son shines into our lives.

Of course, we will still stand before our God to answer for our sins, for what we have done and for what we have not done, but we have an Advocate, a Defender, who is Jesus Christ, the Risen One of God, and through his name there is the forgiveness of sins and acceptance that is not deterred by guilt.^{vi}

Walter Marshall Horton tells the story of a young woman of ill repute who was wounded in a drunken brawl and brought to a local hospital. As she lay unconscious and dying, a nurse sat beside her. Awakening and opening her eyes, she looked at the nurse and asked, "Tell me straight. Do you think God cares about people like me? Do you think God can forgive someone as bad as I am?" The nurse didn't know what to say. She offered up a silent prayer, seeking authorization, and then replied, "I'm telling you straight. God cares for you, and God forgives you." The girl gave a little sigh and slipped away into unconsciousness. Her face smoothed and relaxed as death overtook her. When the fog lifts, we see the resurrected Christ assuring us that God cares for us and forgives us, and the power of evil is dispelled.

Secondly, it would dispel the power of death. Just as the dying girl could close her eyes, confident in the caring of God in Christ, so too can we put aside fear of death and be confident. Just as Mary met the risen Lord in the garden, so shall we meet Christ, following our own death. Paul writes, "If we have been united with [Christ] in death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a Resurrection like his."^{vii}

The great scientist Michael Faraday, pioneer of electromagnetism, as he lay dying, was asked by a friend, "What are your speculations about death?" Surprised Faraday replied, "Speculations? I have none. I am resting on certainties. I know Whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day."^{viii} When the fog clears, there is a certainty offered by the Risen Lord that we shall share in Christ's Resurrection, and the power of death is dispelled.

Thirdly, it would dispel the power of despair. As we walk the lonely byways of life, as we struggle with life's trials and tribulations, and also as we experience the joys of life, we know that we are not alone. Our Lord is with us. The Risen Christ can be and is a living presence in our lives.

The explorer and missionary David Livingstone wrote that it was not he alone but he and Jesus, who went tramping across the continent of Africa. The Scottish Presbyterian pastor and theologian Samuel Rutherford while in prison wrote to a friend, "Jesus Christ came into my cell last night, and every stone flashed like a ruby." And there are others, like these, thousands of witnesses through the centuries and generations, who testify that the Risen Lord has come to walk with them in life, and so the power of despair has been dispelled by "the sunshine of his face."

There is a dark side to the Resurrection, that the Risen Christ has become the judge of the living and the dead, but if we look up, we will see that the fog is dispelled, and the glory of God is shining through. By the grace of God, Jesus defeated the enemy. Jesus defeated our sin, our death and our despair, and dispelled their power.

I've found a Friend; O such a Friend!
So kind, and true, and tender!
So wise a Counselor and Guide,
So mighty a Defender!
From Him who loves me now so well
What power my soul can sever?
Shall life or death, shall earth or hell?
No! I am [Christ's] for ever.^{ix}

Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed! Hallelujah! Amen.

ⁱ Cf. Luke 24: 34.

ⁱⁱ *Statement of Faith*, United Church of Christ USA.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Apostles' Creed*. See *Voices United*, page 918.

iv Acts 10: 40, 41.

v Acts 10: 40, 42. See also *The Apostle's Creed*.

vi 1 John 2: 1.

vii Romans 6: 5.

viii Quoted in *The Homiletic Review* (April 1896), p. 442. See <https://archive.org/details/homileticreview21unkngoog/page/441/mode/2up?q=faraday&view=theater>

ix James G. Small, "I've found a Friend," *The Hymnary of The United Church of Canada*, The United Church Publishing House, 1930, #128.