

WE *had* HOPED

An Easter sermon by F. Jay Deacon
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As Spring struggles to arrive, I thought a little bit of ancient heresy about **rebirth** might help it, or help *us*, anyway. It comes from the ancient Gnostics, whom the official church did everything it could to silence!

In the early centuries of the Common Era, according to the triumphant new entity that resulted when the Roman Empire and the Church joined together as one power, your salvation depended on a resuscitated cadaver. That's what they told you. The Resurrection. The conquest of death.

According to that version of the story, Jesus the teacher and street philosopher had become Christ the God and had ascended into heaven, leaving no other direct witnesses, no other interpreters or representatives on earth, than the Church itself, and its special Apostles, appointed by the risen Christ on his way up and out. And to many people, if the body of that Galilean teacher turned God was not so resuscitated, then the bridge is out, it's all over, everything unravels.

But of course you know that there have always been other ways to look at this, without the need for a resuscitated body! It's just that all the others were declared heresy by this religio-political complex, and its official councils. So it's to this heretical vision of the Gnostics that I now turn.



You want to do something about death, which is problem for us, inasmuch as, in this world, none of us gets out of here alive. You want to do something about disappointment and sorrow and hurt.

Life's limitations. The Is-That-All-There-Is feeling.



Consider that strange little story at the end of Luke's Gospel. Now this is Luke's own story; nowhere else is there anything like it.

And here are two of his disciples, on their way to Emmaus. Which means on their way *out of* Jerusalem.

What the followers of Jesus felt after his execution, at Jerusalem, cannot be far different than the despair expressed in these words of Thomas Carlyle, and known, in some form, with varying degrees of

THE READINGS

Luke 24:13ff

Now, that same day two of them were traveling to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were engaged in conversation about all that had taken place. And it so happened, during the course of their discussion, that Jesus himself approached and began to walk along with them. But they couldn't recognize him.

He said to them, "What are you discussing as you walked along?"

Then they paused, looking depressed. One of them, named Cleopas, said to him in reply, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who doesn't know what's happened there these last few days?"

And he said to them, "What are you talking about?"

And they said to him, "About Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet powerful in word and deed in the eyes of God and all the people, and about how our ranking priests and rulers turned him in to be sentenced to death, and crucified him. We were hoping that he would be the one who was going to ransom Israel."

They had gotten close to the village to which they

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intensity, to every one of us. Here's how Carlyle put it:

“Are not the gates of this world's Happiness inexorably shut about thee; hast thou a hope that is not mad?”¹



Utter hopelessness, crushing disappointment. Their friend and hero and inspiration the latest victim of that cruel Roman occupation, infamous for crucifying thousands and thousands of people. They were heading out of Jerusalem, scene of trauma and disillusion. And fear, and danger, and sorrow, and a memory of horror. Of course they were on their way out of Jerusalem, headed for the quiet sanctuary of Emmaus. Wouldn't you?

Please note. They find, somewhere along the way on that road, a third person walking with them and what he says inspires them and their hearts burn within them — *but* they don't recognize him.

This is no bodily resurrection.

In so many of these ancient resurrection stories, *they don't recognize him*. What, had he shaved off his beard? Got new glasses? No. These little pieces of ancient tradition don't come from people who wanted you to think they'd seen him in the flesh.

Yeh there are other stories, *later* stories, in these same Gospels, about a resuscitated body of a man turned God. Those aren't the stories that interest me today.



So — uh, well, did they see him, or not? was he really there, or not? But this ancient fable doesn't have to add up: It is, after all, a fable. Did they see him?

What you love will live in your eyes. They recognized no physical presence but they recognized that he was there.

And something else. Filled up with that recognition, filled up with his presence, *they turn around*. They head back to Jerusalem to face whatever must be faced there.

And look at what happens in the Gospel of Thomas — the oldest of the Gospels, rejected by the Church. In the Gospel of Thomas, this Jesus, a wisdom teacher, doesn't require any resurrection, because resurrection is all around us. Listen to what he says: *the Kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people don't see it.*



We had hoped. Well, they had *really* hoped. Hoped with every fiber of their being, that's how hard they had hoped.

Never mind that *what* they had hoped for was little more than a reconstruction of long-learned habits of thought and expectation, seasonal re-runs of the old national myth, another tired return to the inadequate hopes | everybody had | that had al-

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were going, and he acted as if he were going on. But they entreated him, saying, “Stay with us; it's almost evening, the day is practically over.” So he went in to stay with them.

And so, as soon as he took his place at table with them, he took a loaf, and gave a blessing, broke it, and started passing it out to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Weren't our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?” And they got up at once and returned to Jerusalem.

The Gospel of Thomas, chapter 113:

His disciples said to him, “When will Kingdom come?”

“It will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, 'Look, here!' or 'Look, there!' Rather, the Kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people don't see it.”

The Gospel According to Philip:

Those who say that the lord first died and then arose are mistaken, for he first arose and then died. . . . People who say they will first die and then arise are mistaken. If they do not first receive resurrection while they are alive, once they have died they will receive nothing.

ready failed, only this time they wouldn't, would they, this time it would be better.

Did you ever live that way? We will try the same thing only this time it will work. Like a revolving restaurant except the entree never comes. It is a psychological fact that we seem bent on going around and around again, in the same dismal merry-go-round, hoping that this time it will come out right.

This is the quandary and challenge of life. What it takes to stop the cycle, to open our minds and hearts to a wider domain of possibility. We don't go there easily. It's hard, so hard, to step off the conveyer belt, and set out on our own journey to destiny, who knows where.

Frances Wickes put it so well:

The victim who is nailed to his own dead past is crucified on the tree of death, which will never flower into a tree of new life, and the victim is a useless sacrifice to an ancient unchanging image of an untransformed and untransforming god, who has lost the power of creation and re-creation."²

Yeh. What had they thought would happen? Hadn't their teacher told them again and again the *the Commonwealth of God is within*? Not the usual sort of kingdom with armies marching off to war. What an unsettling thing it was every time he said it.

Their hope would yet lead them to deeper hopes, better things than the things they thought they were hoping for.

Hope is a spiritual force. When it solidifies into something specific *for which* you hope, a kingdom or an accomplishment maybe, it is no longer hope; it's a goal, a plan. Goals and plans are good working maps for living. *They are not* the spiritual force I mean by hope. They are subject to being smashed to fine dust without notice.

We are so sure of what it is we yearn for, and so sure when our hopes are disappointed. It's like death. Like drowning in the sea.

Sometimes you're hurled into the surging

tides a great sea and when you are you have to know that you are made of the same stuff as this sea and you can swim.

Inherent in the crisis, the storm, and the great contests, there is great energy. There's power there. These moments demand the strength of the gods, and the gods reside *in us*.

The Commonwealth of God is within. So is the dying and rising. And God is the most interior, authentic life and consciousness in you. And here's the paradox.

This divine commonwealth or Kingdom-of-God within is an energy and a power that is one with the power that ignites the stars and makes the earth awaken in spring.



It's not that we should never feel fear or sorrow, never weep or tremble. The person who is fully alive *feels things* — feels the magnitude and depth and breadth of things.

You feel it, feel the whole force of it, and you know something more. You know there are energies at work that you can't see, and an intelligence is moving all this great roaring maelstrom along toward something you haven't imagined, something that is more deeply, more truly, what you hoped than any plan or goal you could fashion, any image you could visualize.



And there is death. And there is resurrection. *What has to die?*

The primitive mind and its primitive gods will have to die and be reborn.

God — so far as they knew, so far as the generations that preceded them had known, so far as the long past had known — was a being who dwelt out there, far away, in the sky, in the heavens. The creative power that undergirds all that is and all that shall be — was something separate from them, a power-god who belonged to a chosen people and who fought on their behalf. And everyone seems to believe that they themselves, and no one else, are God's chosen people. He — usually *he* — ,

sent his people to war against their enemies, was in firm control of everything, would take care of everything. For as long as anybody knew, that was the way it was.

Sometimes this fearsome God, or the fearsome gods, required victims. Unwilling, impotent victims — slain | to feed the savage blood lust of the gods | and to win their favor. Only when the wrath of god was appeased by the offering up of the human sacrifice, could favor be bestowed upon the tribe.

That god had now demanded one last sacrifice. Because, at least for this one who had os recently and tragically died the death of crucifixion at Jerusalem, and for these two who this day would meet him on the road, that god was about to fall out of the sky, be transformed, be recognized in each other as God's own self.

God fell out of the sky. Yet what really changed was our advancing human consciousness. This Galilean teacher had come to a new realization: he understood that in ourselves we can recognize God's own self, as he recognize it in himself. The energy of the god had to become an inner energy, a creative, courageous impulse, at the heart of highly conscious people. Humanity was becoming conscious, and God found human form. The fear and dread you felt toward the gods was replaced by a different kind of relationship: love. And love is the source of hope.



Their friend was gone, dead.

Now, the idea of rising from the dead, the stories about it, took a lot of different forms, in a host of gospels the church fathers didn't care to publish. That itself is a lesson for us. Maybe it doesn't come as you expect it. Can you still recognize it, see it?

The death part: We understand about the loss; it is real enough to us. You already know about loss.

There are those things we thought were so essential, and they are wrenched away; and

there are others that we have to find the will to let go ourselves. You may have spent quite a bit of your life getting rid of things you don't love — part of your history, stories about aches and struggles, resentments and hurt and paths taken and then, upon coming to your senses, abandoned. Baggage we've carried. What then? All the poets and mystics and saints say a human life can go higher than zero.

And the star we choose to follow upward is the star of what we love. But we don't always recognize it.



The days of our lives are theatres for transformation, where death and rebirth always awaits, where our cries of "We had hoped" will have to give way to a deeper sight, a more penetrating vision that can see beyond our plans and goals to something *more*. That's not just some intellectual thing. That takes a different kind of consciousness.

Here is something else the Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas says — it's this: "*I am not your teacher. Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring that I have tended.*"

This isn't just grasping a concept intellectually. It's about a state of consciousness; *it is about being in love*. "You have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring that I have tended."

And Resurrection is not something that happens *after* death! A Sufi writer found this statement in a novella by Balzac³:

Resurrection is accomplished by the wind of heaven that sweeps the worlds. The Angel carried by the wind does not say: Arise ye dead! He says: Let the living arise!

And then there's this marvelous passage, this from the second century of the Common Era, the Valentinian *Gospel According to Philip*: Listen to this:

Those who say that the lord first died and then arose are mistaken, for he first arose

and then died. . . . People who say they will first die and then arise are mistaken. If they do not first receive resurrection while they are alive, once they have died they will receive nothing.



Let the living arise, arise into the full depths and wideness of a quality of life without time, beyond time. Resurrection and eternal life means entering this moment, this present, as a timeless now. It means realizing that this stream of time that you're caught up in is a kind of illusion, just as the physicist Julian Barbour meant, when he said *time is just an illusion to prevent everything happening at once*. He went on to say "Quantum cosmology — and hence our universe — is timeless."⁴ But what is time? And what is this moment where we are? *Everything is here*, in this moment. As I grow older I begin to understand this. In that moment beyond time, that ecstatic experience of pure emptiness they experienced on the road to Emmaus, *he was there, never* to be taken from them. In that kind of timeless time, he wasn't going away and they weren't either. They were okay, they were free, they were safe. There was more to them than all the trouble they'd been experiencing up in Jerusalem. They had been lifted beyond the personal sphere into the sphere of Spirit. They were part of the energy and brilliance that is making the world that will be. For them, life was just beginning. And this forward thrust was about to take them back to Jerusalem with a momentum of its own.



What happened on that Emmaus road, on their bitter flight from Jerusalem, the scene of their disillusion? But it's a fable, about you and me, about *how we see*. Our despair cries out, "We had hoped," but we might want to listen to how we finish our sentence. Hoped?

Hope is the response of the soul to something from beyond that draws us forward. If you already know what's there, it isn't hope.

But hope, divinely-intoxicated hope, has the capacity, with quiet listening, gentle reflection, patient attentiveness, to discern in unexpected places the *deeper object of its yearning*, the many-formed ONE with whom we are in love.

What we love, we become. And we may be amazed as the beauty of its real nature is revealed.

You will recognize what you love. You will discern it in the passing caravan of things and persons and events. What we love will live in our eyes, like a dog I know who can always see, anywhere, in any conditions, certain small animals or edibles. I knew of a potter who loved yellow glaze, which he made from a certain yellow sand, which his eyes could spot where no one else would see it. What you love will guide you. After all our losses and beyond them, what we love, we become. There is no other possible destiny.



There is hope as long as there is love. While love remains, so does hope. Sometimes our efforts seem to be futile. When we see our works carried away like sandcastles in the surf, we might remember that the Buddha speaks about right understanding and right mindfulness and right effort and right work and right action, but the Buddha never speaks of right result.

We think our loving is in vain, lost to the ether. When I feel that way, I turn, you will not be surprised to learn, to Emerson, who writes:

It never troubles the sun that some of his rays fall wide and vain into ungrateful space, and only a small part on the reflecting planet. . . . Thou art enlarged by thy own shining. . . . It is thought a disgrace to love unrequited. But the great will see that true love cannot be unrequited. True love transcends [its] object, and dwells and broods on the eternal . . .



We had hoped. And real hope is a spiritual power whose source is divine. But it is a transformative power that leads us, sometimes painfully, beyond the goals we once thought worth pursuing. Leads us to the breaking of lesser goals, and in the breaking, to the opening up of ourselves, and there is more to us than has yet been made visible, and the gods dwell at the core of our Selves. Let the living arise today!

- ¹ Thomas Carlyle. *Sartor Resartus*. II:vi. In *A Carlyle Reader*, ed. G.B. Tennyson. Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 230f.
- ² Frances G. Wickes. *The Inner World of Choice*. Boston: Sego Press, 1988, p. 148.
- ³ *Louis Lambert*, cited by Henry Corin.
- ⁴ *The End of Time: The Next Revolution in Our Understanding of the Universe*, 55f, 59. "In any instant, we are aware of many things at once. Through memories we are, as it were present simultaneously in many different Nows . . . Our memories are pictures of other Nows within this Now, rather like snapshots in an album.² . . . Quantum cosmology — and hence our universe — is timeless.³"

MEDITATION

We are gathered today
each with joys
and with disappointed hopes
and beyond all tumult and the tangled travails of our days
we come to this quiet, this sanctuary, this sacred refuge apart
The vastness, the immensity from which we first came
From which our lives may spring fresh, new, unspoiled
Again, and again, and again
Today
So let us see and know the Radiance that inhabits this moment
and inhabits our very selves,
that shines from the interior of things,
that never dies, that is without time
That lights these minds and fires these hearts
To pursue paths that only eyes of love can see and recognize
That lead us into the world of time, into the tumult of these days
To do its work
its urgent work
Propelled by the energies of Life Itself
born anew in the strength of creation
always flowing,
revealed again, now, today,
in this silence.