

## Easter Day 2013

As we step into the Great 50 days of Easter  
I invite you to consider that we should worry *less*  
about what people say they believe happened one Sunday morning 2,000 years ago  
and *more* about whether we are living as if resurrection still happens.

Along these lines, Clarence Jordan,  
one of my heroes and a twentieth-century Christian saint, said,  
“The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb,  
but the *full hearts of his transformed disciples*.  
The crowning evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but a *spirit-filled fellowship*.  
Not a rolled-away stone, but a *carried-away church*.”

Clarence Jordan was born in Talbotton, Georgia in 1912, the seventh of ten children.  
The Jordans were active member of the local Southern Baptist church.  
At church Clarence was taught a vision of racial equality  
(“Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in God’s sight...”),  
but he was increasingly bothered that these lyrics were in stark contrast  
to the racial discrimination he regularly witnessed outside church walls,  
not to mention the racial segregation on Sunday mornings.

After graduating from high school, Clarence earned a degree in agriculture,  
then a Ph.D. in the Greek New Testament.  
As his days of formal schooling were ending,  
plans began to take shape to found a community to be called “Koinonia Farms,”  
named after the Greek word for “fellowship or communion.”  
He sought to unite his twin passion for agriculture and scripture  
with his commitment to radical Christian discipleship.  
It would hopefully be, in Clarence’s words,  
a “demonstration plot for the kingdom of God.”

In 1942, Clarence, his wife, and another couple purchased 440 acres of land  
in Sumter County near Americus, Georgia about three hours south of Atlanta,  
but trouble came almost immediately.  
From the beginning they had put racial equality into practice  
by inviting the workers on the farm to eat together, irrespective of race.  
This choice quickly spurred the local Ku Klux Klan into action.  
There were many caustic encounters with local racist residents,  
and one of Clarence’s favorite questions  
for those with loyalties to their southern heritage was,  
“Your choice seems quite clear.  
It is whether you will follow your granddaddy or Jesus Christ.”

Clarence commanded respect because he was so willing to put his life on the line for what he believed in, and he was famous for his pithy retorts, which helped diffuse tension even as they prophetically critiqued the status quo. One famous example is when a pastor showed him an expensive cross the congregation had just purchased for the steeple. Clarence replied, "You got cheated. Times were Christians could get them for free."

Koinonia Farms, in time, became Koinonia Partners, which eventually birthed Habitat for Humanity International under the leadership of Millard Fuller, who was deeply inspired by Clarence. Clarence died in 1969 not long after the first Koinonia Partners house was built, but the legacy and the challenge of his life live on.

Listen again to his words:

"The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb, but the full hearts of his transformed disciples. The crowning evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship. Not a rolled-away stone, but a carried-away church." Again, what I take away from this quote is that we should worry *less* about what people say they believe happened 2,000 years ago and *more* whether we are living as if resurrection still happens. The question is, "How are we partnering with God today in transforming despair into hope, apathy into compassion, hate into love, and death into new life?"

The contemporary prophet Wendell Berry similarly challenges us in his poem "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front." Here's a taste of this poetic and prophetic masterpiece:

So, friends, 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.  
Denounce the government and embrace the flag.  
Hope to live in that free republic for which it stands.  
Give your approval to all you cannot understand.  
Praise ignorance, for what man has not encountered he has not destroyed.  
Ask the questions that have no answers.  
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.  
Say that your main crop is the forest that you did not plant,  
that you will not live to harvest.  
Say that the leaves are harvested when they have rotted into the mold.  
Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.

Put your faith in the two inches of humus  
that will build under the trees every thousand years.  
Listen to carrion – put your ear close,  
and hear the faint chattering of the songs that are to come.  
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.  
Laughter is immeasurable.  
Be joyful though you have considered all the facts.

There is so much more to this wonderfully provocative poem,  
but I continue to be most drawn to the advice of Berry's closing line:  
"Practice resurrection."

What would it mean, not to "believe in the Resurrection," but to *practice resurrection*?  
Peter Rollins, a noted theologian for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,  
has a powerful monologue that speaks to what it might look like  
to practice — or fail to practice — resurrection.  
Rollins begins with the intentionally shocking assertion that,

"Without equivocation or hesitation I fully and completely admit  
that I deny the resurrection of Christ.  
This is something that anyone who knows me could tell you,  
and I am not afraid to say it publicly, no matter what some people may think."

After a dramatic pause, he continues,  
"I deny the resurrection of Christ every time  
I do not serve at the feet of the oppressed,  
each day that I turn my back on the poor;  
I deny the resurrection of Christ when I close my ears to the cries of the downtrodden  
and lend my support to an unjust and corrupt system.  
However there are moments when I affirm that resurrection,  
few and far between as they are.  
I affirm it when I stand up for those who are forced to live on their knees,  
when I speak for those who have had their tongues torn out,  
when I cry for those who have no more tears left to shed."

Clarence Jordan, Walter Berry, Peter Rollins are all pointing out that it is *less* important  
what people say they believe happened on a Sunday morning 2,000 years ago  
and much *more* important whether we are partnering with God  
to practice resurrection today.

This Easter, these prophets challenge us to ask,  
"How are we — and how are we *not* — following Jesus' example  
of caring for the poor and of building the Beloved Community?"  
As we seek to practice resurrection right now in *this world*,  
I can think of no better celebration of an inclusive Christian theology of Easter  
than Allen Ginsberg's famous poem, "Footnote to Howl," which invites us to a  
celebratory, life-affirming, visceral embrace of holiness in all things:

Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! (x7)  
Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! (x8)  
The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy!  
The nose is holy! The tongue and hand holy!  
Everything is holy! everybody's holy! everywhere is holy! everyday is in eternity!  
Everyman's an angel! The bum's as holy as the seraphim!  
the madman is holy as you my soul are holy!  
The typewriter is holy the poem is holy the voice is holy  
the hearers are holy the ecstasy is holy! . . .  
holy the unknown and suffering beggars holy the hideous human angels! . . .  
Holy the sea holy the desert holy the railroad holy the locomotive holy the visions  
holy the hallucinations holy the miracles holy the eyeball holy the abyss!  
Holy forgiveness! mercy! charity! faith! Holy! Ours! bodies! suffering! magnanimity!  
Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul!

This Easter, may you open your whole self — heart, soul, mind, and strength —  
to God's inspiring call to new life and renewed love.  
May you feel God luring you, prompting you, and encouraging you —  
each day and in each new present moment — to *practice resurrection*.

*The sentiments of this sermon are indeed mine, but the words are wholly indebted to  
Carl Gregg, who posted it on Patheos in 2012.*

*<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2012/03/practice-resurrection-progressive-christian-theology-for-easter/>*