



# Living Into Resurrection

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“Living Into Resurrection” | Ephesians 2:1-10 | Pastor Jess Scholten

I have an embarrassing bookmark that I keep in my Bible. It’s from when I was confirmed, and on it is scribbled a rudimentary understanding of my middle school faith. 1) I know that Jesus is my savior, and 2) I know that I’ll go to heaven when I die.

Fine. It’s... accurate. It sums up my 7<sup>th</sup> grade Hermione vibe – to always have the right answer.

But there’s no poetry to it – no nuance of faith – no energy or ethos or acknowledgement of love and grace for the present. This kind of theology – while Scripturally accurate – misses so much in life itself and so much of what God’s word has to teach us. Yes, Jesus offers us resurrection life when we die, but also – while we are living. It’s part of what makes life so magical – that there are seasons of growth and new life. That our timelines have rhythms of fall like we’re witnessing so picturesquely while the leaves die off and the trees settle into a more dormant period... followed by spring, with all the buzz of new life and resurrection.

These patterns of seedtime and harvest reflect God’s patterns of resurrection – an old life left behind, a new one granted – not only when we die but granted while we live.

Paul writes of this in the passage that continues on from last week in Ephesians Two, the first ten verses. Hear what God’s word has for us today:

You were dead through the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup>in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup>All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. <sup>4</sup>But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us <sup>5</sup>even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup>and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup>so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.

<sup>8</sup>For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— <sup>9</sup>not the result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup>For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. (Ephesians 2: 1-10 NRSV) Thanks be to God.

What's most notable in this part of Paul's letter to the Ephesians is the distinct before and after visions. Once you were dead through trespasses and sin, he reflects. These are the things that keep us from a meaningful relationship with God – patterns, Paul indicates, that are from this world. The things that tie us to the passions of our flesh. Human patterns that seek after our personal pleasures and gains without regard to others or God's hope for how we will behave; protective illusions that appear to grant us safety – a sense of control or security, but disregard trust in God. Things of the world that build pride, achievement, and self-sufficiency. A life before knowing God.

But the **after** is a vision of life made new in God, a life steeped in grace, a life where boasting is unnecessary because the immeasurable riches are *gifts from God*. Things like kindness, faith, trust, and the real life we have that is connected to being raised up with Christ and seated with him in the heavenly places. Gifts like that buzz you have after sharing an anonymous generosity or an act of compassion or having a meaningful time of fellowship or service. It seems of no or little value to the world, but it is immeasurably precious to the deep holy within us.

Morgan Harper Nichols is an artist and author, and I recently was so drawn to one of her pieces, I ordered a copy as a reminder on hard days: "Notice how there can be a sense of hopeful aliveness even in the smallest transformation." That hopeful aliveness is the Holy Spirit at work, the gift of new life, a taste of resurrection.

These two visions capture what happens again and again in our lives – resurrection. God's transforming work of the Spirit. For we are always dying and rising, learning and growing. As people of faith, we seek after this. We want, hopefully, to mature in Christ, to foster better patience and wisdom, to experience joy – not mere happiness in security or worldly goods, but contentment and gratitude at our very core.

It's so rare these days to find people rooted in this kind of peace. At the Leadership Institute, which a few of us on staff, session, and in leadership attended a few weeks ago at Resurrection Church in Kansas City, founded by United Methodist pastor, Adam Hamilton, one of my workshops was titled, "The Resilient Church: Trauma-Informed Care for Congregational Wellbeing." Our main speaker was Dr. Rebecca Chow, who talked about how pre-pandemic about a quarter of the general population in the US struggled with some sort of emotional dysregulation.

Dysregulation is defined by strong emotional reactions, anxious or irritable behaviors – basically, making small things into big things. Other dysregulated reactions include difficulty calming down, outbursts, relationship issues, impulsive behavior. Maybe it involves a mental health diagnosis or heavy amounts of stress that could lead to strong reactions, addictions, or less balanced thinking. Post-pandemic, Dr. Chow said, flipped the dysregulation statistic from 1 in 4 to almost 3 in 4, 74% of the population having some level of dysregulated reactions. More than half the population with unbalanced reactions to things: road rage, inability to handle minor inconveniences, strong feelings about small details.

Which means more than ever we must seek to develop that deeply rooted, centered, maturity

of faith that helps us weather difficulties. We want to be the kind of people who let small things be small things so that we have the energy and vision to see the big picture and participate in the important things of life – thriving and helping others thrive.

Melissa Hinz, our minister of music, and Marilyn Krichko, one of our seminarians and Awaken Dane leaders, and I were at a retreat this Friday through a multi-church city-wide collaboration. As part of worship, we heard John O'Donohue's poem, "A Blessing for One Who Is Exhausted." In it, O'Donohue, a 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish poet and contemporary Christian mystic, contemplates the ways we are moving toward exhaustion, which is its own kind of dying we do in this life: "When the rhythm of the heart becomes hectic, time takes on the strain until it breaks; then all the unattended stress falls in on the mind like an endless, increasing weight." He writes, "The light in your mind becomes dim. Things you could take in your stride before/Now become laborsome events of will."

O'Donohue has so many pointed images of the ways this world and its injustices or stresses bring us down – weariness invading our spirits, gravity dragging down our bones, the tide going out, walking on unsure ground. All of these are a kind of dying that happens in our soul.

O'Donohue continues to reflect on how this exhaustion brings us to the space where "There is nothing else to do now but rest/And patiently learn to receive the self/You have forsaken for the race of days." In that space of rest, we will know grief and feel the results of having "traveled too fast over false ground," but one also finds refuge, sees all the small miracles we used to rush by, "draw alongside the silence of stone/Until its calmness can claim you."

O'Donohue concludes: "Learn to linger around someone of ease/Who feels they have all the time in the world./Gradually, you will return to yourself,/ Having learned a new respect for your heart/And the joy that dwells far within slow time."

These are the people we are called to become – ones who are headed someday to heaven, sure, but who also recognize that at any moment, we are also resurrected people sitting even this moment with Jesus, who is by the power of the Holy Spirit, growing us into the people we are called to be.

This being human is complicated. One of my favorite montages is from, *The Good Place*, which captures the good, bad, and mundane of life. Here's a short clip from the series' finale, where the main characters Eleanor and Janet wonder how it's going for Michael, an eternal being who has decided to become a human. \*video clip\*

We all need teachers, because we're all learning how to be human, how to be faithful, how to become a resurrected version of ourselves.

Spiritual practices such as attending worship, praying, regularly steeping ourselves in Scripture with daily readings and memorization, learning and growing about faith through Sunday school and small groups – all of these and so many more are ways that the Spirit uses to help us move from death to resurrection. But there are two things that are especially helpful to hone as mature Christians: discernment and trust in God.

Discernment involves knowing what to align ourselves with and what to let go of. We want to be aligning ourselves more closely with where God wants us to be and moving away from those things that do not bear fruit in our lives. Sure, at its most basic form, good discernment is simply making good decisions... but good decisions *in the context* of faith. It's making decisions not based on following the course of this world, as Paul writes, but as if we were already seated next to Christ, looking at the big picture with the same grace and love with which God sees us.

And trust involves relying on God's presence already at work in the universe. We still discern and invest, but not as if it is entirely up to us, not to the point where we lose faith unless we see action. Scripture tells us in so many ways that God is always at work. In Proverbs, we're reminded: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight." A reminder that God is walking with us, leading us to green pastures, by our side in dark valleys, present and blessing us on every step of our journey – on days of exhaustion or the walking dead and in the rising and new life.

That cycle happens again and again in our lives – we are always dying and rising. There's always something of the world that sneaks its way into our lives – I could name hundreds of little bad habits that have crept in on my own life, and you have them too. Sometimes it's a big thing like an addiction or a small thing that might actually be worse like how we use our time... or waste our time. Sometimes pride is at work as we try to achieve or seek after more, sometimes stress because our lives have become imbalanced or the lives of those around us are, sometimes sloth – just not investing in ourselves or those around us. **We are always dying and rising.**

And then, someday, we will actually die. After all, none of us are getting out of here alive.

Last week's All Saints Concert was a shining example of the range of experiences around death. Yes, sadness – Hymn 808, "When Memory Fades." Yes, the slowness that happens with grief. It's not all tears all the time, but sometimes it's like a quiet violin and piano echoing and cycling through slow, moody rhythms. But also, sometimes it's a party. We don't think of it as a party because there is sadness, but it is in some ways. Gathering at the River or being reminded that we don't end at the grave.

Our All Saints' Sunday adult ed class was on planning your memorial service. It was indeed the least attended adult ed class so far this season – maybe this whole year. Which is too bad, because death is simply a part of life, a new way God is at work in resurrection.

The thing memorial service planning helps us face is the reminder that how we live is important to how we're remembered when we die. It's our legacy. There's a spot on our website you can find memorial service plans – take a look, maybe start pondering hymns and Scripture passages. But more importantly, ponder how it is that you want to live, so that when you die, people remember that about you.

### **Start practicing resurrection today.**

What do we want said about us when we die? That is how we're supposed to live. We had an old life – a life before we knew God was at work. But now, by God's abundant grace, we have a new life – not just when we die, but a resurrection right around the corner, that can be seen in the smallest transformations, hopeful and joy-filled. In every bulb a flower, in cocoons a hidden promise. Let's live into resurrection, now and forever. Amen.