

# **“JESUS CHRIST IS RISEN TODAY. ALLELUIA!”**

**a sermon on Jeremiah 31:1-6, Acts 10:34-43, Matthew 28:1-10**

**Easter Morning**

**April 16, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller**

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We have finally reached the day that is the absolute peak in our observance of the Christian year, the day on which our order of worship changes from its somber Lenten mood, to that of a celebration so joyous it can hardly be contained by the notes we play and sing, and the words that issue from our mouths - words so astoundingly grandiose that we can hardly believe them even as they pass across our tongues, let alone explain how they might be true. Jesus is risen *from the dead!* That is our chant this morning. Alleluia. He is risen indeed!

It is a spectacular event, no doubt about it. Worth celebrating, to be sure. But what exactly does it mean? That is a question that has been raised by many of the world's greatest thinkers over the last two millennia.

And if this is the day that is so pivotal in the story of our faith and our salvation, then it is a day that must have something significant to offer as an explanation to a much broader and essential question; namely, what - finally - is Christianity?

John Milton's classic epic poems, *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, attempt to answer that broader question by focusing on two Biblical events. The first event is the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden - the paradise from which the two were cast out when they gave in to temptation. That story is the basis of *Paradise Lost*.

But in *Paradise Regained*, the scene for reflection is Jesus' temptation by Satan just after his baptism, at the start of ministry. And unlike Adam and Eve, of course, Jesus (being God's perfect and Only Son), is able to *withstand* the temptation, and thereby open the way for humanity's return to paradise.

That, Milton would surely proclaim, is the essence of Christianity – that it represents the ultimate triumph of the forces of good over the forces of evil, and therefore represents the path by which we can return from this “weary world” to the paradise of God's nearer presence.

In that view, the news that Jesus is alive is the affirmation of his triumph over the dark forces. It is the word that the devil, however he is conceived, is defeated. And that classic view of the resurrection, and the Christian faith, has been and continues to be a sustaining force in the lives of millions of the faithful.

But in the pluralistic, and technological “modern” age in which we live, there are those for whom such an answer does not capture the real essence of what is unique about the Christian faith.

In his book, *As I See Religion*, Harry Emerson Fosdick, the American Baptist clergyman who pastored Riverside Church in New York City for many years earlier in the last century, points out that “all the superficial elements of orthodox Christianity can be paralleled in non-Christian faiths.” Among these elements Fosdick includes the “acceptance of a holy book,” which many world religions also profess, “miracles,” even those of “raising the dead, transforming one element, like water, into another, walking on the sea, and feeding the multitudes with a small food supply,” which can all be found in the stories of other historic faiths, “the deification and worship of the religion’s founder,” and “ascription to him of a miraculous birth,” which in various forms can be found in writings about Buddha, Zoroaster, Lao-Tse, and Mahavira.

Further, Fosdick proclaims that “various religions exhibit similar doctrines and practices with reference to the sacraments; ideas associated with atonement are present in all highly developed faiths; ‘No one can be saved without regeneration’ *sounds* Christian, but is actually a quotation from a non-Christian, Greco-Roman Mystery religion; and even justification by faith, so far from being exclusively Pauline or Lutheran, is being stated to-day and lived upon with peace and joy by one of the powerful Buddhist sects.”

Fosdick is not attempting to argue that any of these various beliefs or practices are wrong or “untrue,” you understand, only that in and of themselves they do not capture what is truly *unique* about the Christian faith. That uniqueness, he finally concludes, is Christianity’s absolute insistence on the importance of *personality* - on the importance of the development of persons as persons to the glory of God, on the personality of God Himself, known to us in the *person* of Jesus Christ. “The genius of Christianity,” Fosdick writes, “lies in its reverence for personality.”

“Here we human persons are upon this revolving planet in the sky,” he continues. “We are very tiny, and the universe is huge. Our span of life is brief, while the universe was crashing on unimaginable ages before we were born and will crash on after we have departed. We are frailty itself, at the mercy of a few

particles of disordered matter, so that a slight accident can snuff us out like guttering candles. Tenuous and temporary, a human being seems anything but triumphant in this overwhelming cosmos. Yet at its best Christianity has taken up the cudgels for personality, for its divine origin, spiritual nature, infinite worth, and endless possibilities.”

That is really the essence of the Christian faith - not just that Jesus Christ is God, but that the Almighty God who created the whole universe is also *personal*, and *cares* about living creatures like us, even nurtures us, and guides us by His Spirit.

The odds are against it. Even the physical evidence is against it. But still we make our profession, because our personalities demand it. Fosdick used this illustration to make the point:

“Imagine twin babes, unborn in their mother's womb, gifted with the powers of thought, the one a skeptic and the other a believer. They are living without light and without breathing, both of which would be to them unthinkable. The crisis of birth, tearing them loose from the matrix on which their existence seems fundamentally to depend, would appear to them like death. As for picturing the world without, that would be impossible.

The skeptic babe could say to the believer, ‘You are only a wishful thinker; you desire to go on living and so you think you will. How can you be decently scientific and think that? You see how absolutely our existence depends on present circumstances. You are credulous to suppose that the disruption of them still leave us alive.’

To which the believing babe could reply, ‘My faith is *not* mere wishful thinking. Month after month nature has been at work here developing something so marvelous that I am confident of an aftermath. Nature is not utterly irrational. She means something by all these preparations, and something will come of them.’

To which the skeptic might retort, ‘how, then, do you picture the new life? If you are so sure about the future, describe it! What is it like?’

This would obviously put the believing babe in a difficult situation. ‘I do not know how to picture it,’ he would have to say. ‘It is something unimaginable, but it may still be true. I am agnostic about all details. Only of this I feel confident, that nature is not so senseless as to undertake such a promising process with no end in view. The crisis that you call death will turn out really to be birth.’”

So now when all is said and done, what is so different between a classic view like Milton's and a modern view like Fosdick's is really only the imagery they employ. Both would agree that the time of "grace" for Israel arrived in the person of Jesus Christ, in fulfillment of the prophecies of Jeremiah and the others. And both would agree that the proof of that grace is in the event we celebrate this morning, whether it represents a triumph in battle, or a demonstration of unbounded love and concern.

Easter is a time to rejoice. It is a time to realize that the amazing promises of the Scriptures are true, that our existence in this world has meaning and value, and that its meaning and value will one day find its ultimate fulfillment in the paradise of God's full presence, when we finally reach that darkness we call death, which is really not the "end," but rather the light of a new day.

The Lord is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

To God be the Glory.