

Resurrection Life For Us

Romans 8:31d

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

A little more than a week ago, a gaunt old man with a straggly beard and hair down to his shoulders died 3,000 feet above Houston [in a jet flying him for medical treatment] with no friend or relative at his side. And the funeral was a 17 minute thing. And no one, of course cried at all at the funeral, or felt they should cry. And the main concern after the autopsy was really who would get hold of the \$2 billion that he's worth.

And the whole death is filled with irony. It really is. He was one of the richest men in the Western world and yet he really died of malnutrition, living in a penthouse that cost him \$1,000 a day. And then it's more ironic when you see what his own will and attitude was to it all, because this man, in 1938, received a ticker tape welcome in New York for a record breaking flight. And yet this man who had received all that kind of attention spent the last 20 years of his life in darkened rooms with no one talking to him and talking to no one and communicating by written notes to his aides.

This man, who died because of the poisoning in his own body due to kidney failure, had spent the past 20 years of his life trying to defend himself against infection and poison. And so there were Kleenex everywhere in his rooms. He would not have air conditioning in his rooms, lest it bring in germs. In his determination to defend himself against people and against infection, he isolated himself from everybody and rushed, as all of us know, from the top of one hotel to another in secrecy. And perhaps the most ironic fact about the death is that he refused continually, after the accident that he suffered in London and had that pin put in his hip, he refused continually all the doctors' encouragements to him to walk and to exercise. And if he had done that, he could have lived well beyond 70 and there was no need for him to die. Moreover, he refused any encouragement on their part to begin to eat sensible food; he lived on cookies and milk. And so really he virtually killed himself.

And do you know what he boasted to an executive in 1960? "I have never done anything in my life that I did not want to do." You know what? It's ironic, isn't it, that he had never done anything in his life that he didn't want to do and it was that very attitude that brought about self-destruction, really. And, so it's ironic because he, who defended himself from people all the time, found himself dying in loneliness. He who defended himself against infection all the time, found himself dying of infection. And he, who boasted that he never did anything that he didn't want to do in life, killed himself by the things that he wanted to do.

And, loved ones, that's only one extreme example of this stream of death life that seems to flow through our world. Because there isn't one of us here that hasn't touched it at times. There seems to be a flow of death life that moves through individuals and communities, and wherever it moves, it takes the beauty of the world and it turns it into ugliness. It takes the love of warm relationships and turns them into loneliness. It takes the plentiful, really infinite resources of our universe and turns them into scarcity and deprivation. Wherever this flow of death life comes, it darkens and destroys all that it touches. And you know that it really is a supernatural power. It has to be a power, loved ones, hasn't it, to make a man kill himself. It has to be a power to make people do what they don't want to do and destroy themselves in the process. And you know that

somewhere in that book [the Bible], that power is described as a power that is a murderer. It is determined to destroy life and to kill people. And Howard Hughes' death is just an extreme example of a death life that probably all of us in this room have touched at some time.

I suppose the condition is pretty obvious that he fulfilled to let that death life come into him. The condition he fulfilled was simply, he was out to defend himself against any person that might inconvenience him in any way, or against any pain that he might possibly undergo, or against anything that might be a nuisance to him. He was determined to defend himself and keep himself away from that at all costs. And he was also determined to do in this life exactly what he wanted to do. Now, loved ones, if you fulfill either of those conditions, the death life touches you. It does.

Every one of us who has started off with a bright Easter Sunday morning and have ended up at the end of the day bickering with our wives, know that the death life touched us because we began to fulfill those conditions. Because there's something we wanted our way and that death life began to be released. And the end of the day was a tragedy compared with the way it started out. And you could multiply the examples where that flow of death life seems to have come in, if you look at the ruins of a day on your hands, or you look at the ruins of a marriage on your hands, or you look at the ruins of your business, or your job on your hands, and you think, "How could this come about? It started off so beautifully. How did this happen?"

And, loved ones, it's just true that there is a flow of death life that moves in and destroys and tears apart everyone who fulfills the conditions that it needs to begin to energize a person's life.

I suppose the amazing thing is that today is so different for us. Today is Easter and it's so different from all that gloomy stuff. Today you remember all the kind of life that there is, and that's amazing too, isn't it? In a world that is so filled with the death life, the death life is in Lebanon. The death life is in Ireland. The death life is in Russia. The death life is in cities that are being terrorized. The death life is in bickering families. The death life is in businesses and jobs. It's amazing that though so much of this death life is produced by us men and women, yet there seems – oh the English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it, "There lives the dearest freshness deep down things."

And it's amazing that at this time of the year, you look out at ground that a month ago was hard, and dead, and cold, and there are little purple hyacinths and little yellow daffodils pushing up through it. And it's all so fresh and new. And you look out at trees that were dry and were surrounded by dead brown leaves, and now you begin to see little buds that are just so beautifully wrapped up that you really feel there's been a huge manufacturing company working night and day all through the winter, because they're all just ready there to burst out. And they're all clean and new and fresh. And, oh a month ago, you looked out and there wasn't a thing on the water, and there wasn't a thing on the earth. And now, you look out and all the ducks are quacking and paddling like mad, and all the birds are whistling and flying.

And, it just comes home to you that we seem to have death life flowing all around us in all our own relationships, but there seems to be this new resurrection life that's coming in. And that's hard to explain, isn't it? I mean, I can see how we human beings get fed up with winter, and I can see how we get fed up with misery, but how do we manage to produce summer and spring and joy? And you know fine well that we really don't, that we certainly don't produce spring, and we don't produce summer. But the truth is that we have great trouble producing joy, too. How do you explain it? How do you explain the phenomenon?

And I push you further, which is reality? Which is final reality? The old man with the dialysis tube hanging out of his body, gaunt and emaciated, and a straggly beard and the hair, and the lost look in the eyes, and the plane, and death -- is that final reality? Or is final reality spring, and flowers, and daffodils, and new life? We're all in the same boat in trying to answer that question. We're in the same boat as Mohammed, and we're in the same boat exactly as Confucius, and Buddha. They're all mere men.

All they can do is do what you and I can do this morning. They can examine the phenomena in the world and come up with some personal opinions to explain it, but they really have no more information at their disposal than we have here this morning. So, really, they're all in the same situation. All the great leaders of the religions in the world are in the same situation as we are this morning in trying to answer that question. They're going to give their personal opinion based on observable data here in our closed universe.

Of course, why Easter is so great for us here in this auditorium is not because of the daffodils, or the Easter bonnets, or the summer dresses, or the Easter bunnies, but it's so great because one of us died and disappeared from the earth, and then came back, and for more than a month, showed that he was physically more alive than he had ever been before and showed that he had a spiritual aliveness that was greater than anything we ourselves possessed. And this Person said, "I have been out of this world and have seen our Creator and I tell you that he's my Father and that this life that he's given to me, it is final reality. It is reality that death and death life is something that can be defeated by this stream of life that he has given to me."

And, loved ones, it's because of that man's rising above death, it's because of the careful documentation we have of his resurrection as compared with all the fakes and all the bluffers who by holding their breath or by self-induced comas, have tried to imitate that resurrection -- it's because of the certainty that he did really die and did really rise that we ourselves answer, "Resurrection life is the final reality." And the death life that made that jet over Houston so tragic and so miserable is not final reality, and is, in fact, something that we have reduced resurrection life to ourselves. That final reality is resurrection life.

Now, of course, there's a real problem for us here this morning because we live in an environment of death life. We live in an environment of that old life that is destroying. We live in a life, an environment that is full of the depression and the loneliness and the bewilderment of the death life. And so when we come to this kind of a phenomenon, we describe what is true in our environment. We say, "Listen, in our environment, dead people don't rise, that's just a fact. Now let's face it, dead people don't rise." And, of course, we're like a little mole that is speaking, trying to describe the blue sky while we're underneath the earth. We're talking about something that we cannot see and that we have no experience of. But yet, you know what we're like. We're so proud and we're so sure that the bit of the world that we have seen is all of reality that we proclaim, "Yeah, dead people don't rise, so this man couldn't have risen. He couldn't have risen." And that's been the argument down through history.

Paul was repeating it in I Corinthians 15. People said, "No, dead men don't rise, so this man couldn't have risen." And I think so caught are we in our own death life environment that I think many of us have problems with it. Loved ones, there's no way around it, you can't get around a historical fact, you can't. You can't, by bleating some kind of presuppositional philosophy that dead people don't rise, say, "Therefore, this fact can't have happened." Loved ones, the historical fact of this man's resurrection is so obvious and plain that no presuppositional philosophy about

dead men not rising or the supernatural not being possible will meet the case.

And I think we all know, you could all repeat the old arguments off by heart. But the fact is that old Caesar, you remember, wrote the Gallic Wars. He wrote the Gallic Wars, I suppose in the First Century sometime. And the first manuscript we have of those Gallic Wars is 900 years later. That's the earliest manuscript. And we have only nine of them. Yet we have no doubt that old Caesar fought the Gallic Wars, led his soldiers across the bridge, and met Hannibal.

We believe that Jesus rose from the dead on the basis of 4,000 manuscripts. And the earliest one we have is not 900 years after Caesar wrote his Gallic Wars, but 30 years after John wrote his gospel. 30 years after an eyewitness wrote his account of Jesus' life. In other words, the historical fact of Jesus' death and resurrection is better attested than any other known fact.

You know that the two facts that you can't get away from are the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances. I won't draw it out at length, but some of you may be sitting here with the old arguments that we learned at high school. And they're still running in your mind. And we still are basically unhistorical and unintelligent people. I hate to tell you that, but we are. We hate to take things intelligently, we take them emotionally. And so we tend to take an attitude that, "No, these things can't have happened, so they didn't happen." And then we begin to try to make up possible explanations that would do away with this apparent historical fact. It's basically a non-historical attitude towards history, but you know the way we go. We say, "Oh well, wait a minute I'll tell you how it could have happened."

And then we get into our old arguments. And the truth is the arguments to explain away the resurrection are more difficult to believe than the resurrection itself. And you know that, and so I won't draw it out, loved ones, but there's someone here who's sitting with the old skepticism. So you know how it goes. The disciples stole the body. The disciples stole the body. That's how it happened. That's how you explain the empty tomb. They stole the body.

And you know you come up against a real problem with that one, because you have these men stealing the body of a man that they respected and loved, going out and preaching that this man actually rose from the dead. And yet they know full well that he didn't rise from the dead -- that they actually stole the body and pretended. And that would be all right, loved ones, if they did not come into persecution because of this, and if they did not end up walking into lion arenas with their children in their arms. And then you have to face the fact that these men stole a body, they then proclaimed that he was alive, and then they died willingly for that lie that they knew to be a lie.

And there, of course, you have a psychological and an ethical impossibility. Men who followed Hitler may have followed a lie, but they didn't know it was a lie, they believed it to be true. They didn't make it up themselves. But for the disciples to steal a body and for that to be an explanation of the empty tomb, you'd have to believe that really they were masochists, they were determined to destroy themselves and their families. And men don't die for what they know to be a lie. They may die for what they think is the truth, but they won't die for something that they know is a lie.

And then, "Well, the authorities stole the body. The authorities, the Roman authorities, the Jewish authorities." You know, if we don't want to believe, we'll almost go to any authority, we'll make it Kissinger or Nixon, as well. But, "The authorities stole the body." Well, if they stole the body, all they had to do was present the body to everybody. Parade the body of Jesus through the

streets of Jerusalem, through the streets of Rome, and say, "Look, here is this Christian lie for what you see it to be: just a hoax. Here is the body of this man that they say has risen off the earth."

And then, loved ones, "Well, maybe they didn't steal the body, maybe he really just swooned. Maybe he didn't really die." And then you're faced with just a towering feat of physical strength: that this man, who was bleeding from wounds inflicted by the most efficient killers in the world at that time -- that this man, who bled right through two nights and three days in a tomb had the strength to unwrap the grave clothes from himself, then had the strength to get up and roll back the heavy stone from the tomb and then had the incredible strength to travel really 20, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90 miles in different directions, appearing on fourteen different occasions in different parts of the country, and giving an impression, not just of a man that had managed to overcome his wounds, but a man who was more gloriously alive than he had ever been before. It's just impossible to believe that Jesus just swooned.

And you know then we say, "Well, maybe the women went to the wrong tomb." And we all know women, and they could just do that kind of thing. But you have a real problem, we men are not as dumb as you and we just -- then you have to believe that everybody else kept going to the wrong tomb, that Peter and John, that all the Roman soldiers, everybody kept going to the wrong tomb. And it's harder to believe the explanations, loved ones, than to believe that Jesus really rose from the dead.

It's the same with the resurrection appearances. "They were hallucinations." We all do a few books in psychology and we're right in there with hallucinations. And you know there are laws that govern hallucinations and those laws are not met by the appearances of Jesus. A hallucination has to be experienced by someone who wants it to happen. For example, a mother who has lost a son in the war and she wants to see him coming through the door of the kitchen. And she wants to see him.

These men, you remember, confessed to each other, "We had hoped that it was he that would have redeemed Israel, but we've now given up hope." And they had so given up hope that they were absolutely amazed and could not believe that this was anything but the gardener that appeared outside the tomb. They had lost any hope that he would rise from the dead.

Hallucinations have to appear really over a long, long period of time. These appeared for a little more than a month and then stopped.

A hallucination is a subjective experience. One person sees it. Jesus appeared to all the disciples in the upper room, then to about 500 people at one time. It's impossible, loved ones, to explain away the appearances of Jesus after the resurrection on the basis of hallucinations.

The fact is, he rose from the dead. You know, you just have to face it. It's the best attested fact in our history that Jesus did rise from the dead. And how did he do it?

Well, loved ones, if you'd look just at one verse before we close, it's Romans 1:4, "And designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord." The power came from the spirit, you see the capital S in Spirit. The power for Jesus' resurrection came from the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is God's uncreated life and it is him that brings resurrection life. And wherever he comes, he brings resurrection life. And you yourself can experience resurrection life, loved

ones. Resurrection life touches a dank tomb and turns it into brightness and life. Resurrection life touches misery and turns it into joy. Really, believe me. Resurrection life can come through the Holy Spirit into your own life. Really, that's true. And you have a lot of things in your life that can be touched into life by this power of the Holy Spirit that raised this man, Jesus, from the dead.

What have you to do? Well, Hughes shows you what you've to do for death life. Just defend yourself against anything that would hurt you. Spend your life, spend your days defending yourself against people. Spend your days avoiding people who would be a kind of a nuisance to you. Spend your days avoiding pain or hurt or discomfort in any way. Do that and the power of satanic death life will flow into your life. And your life will get smaller and smaller and smaller. And you'll become a wizened old man or woman, dried up inside. That's what happens. You've already seen it partly in your own life and partly in others' lives.

To experience the resurrection life of the Holy Spirit you do the very opposite, loved ones. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd and the good shepherd gives his life for the sheep." Stop defending yourself. Stop trying to avoid pain. Stop trying to avoid discomfort and inconvenience. Stop trying to avoid people who would be a nuisance to you. Stop trying to protect yourself. Lay yourself out and say, "Lord God, whatever you want to use me for in this life, I'm for it." And, loved ones, there'll be a power of life that will come through you.

And you've known it at times. You know you've known it. You know you've known days when you've been out on some picnic lunch or you've been out on some expedition of some kind, and a lot of other people have left the work to you. And while you resisted it and resented it and were bitter about it, the going was tough and it was heavy, and you were getting tired. Then, when you suddenly took a new attitude to it and said, "Ah, I can do it. I can do it." Suddenly, when you took that attitude, there was a flow of energy that came into you, and you ended that day having done far more work than anybody else, but it seemed that you had more energy than you started off the day with.

Now, loved ones, it's amazing, but that is your Father in heaven trying to give you a notion, "Look, this is the way I want you to live your whole life. I want you to take my son's attitude, 'I have come to give my life a ransom for many. I'm not demanding that I have all the comfort. I'm not demanding that I avoid pain and inconvenience. I'm willing, Lord, for whatever you want me to do. You want me to brush the floor and really painting the wall is nicer? I'll brush the floor, Lord. You want that person to type and be in the front office and me to be in the back stuffing these envelopes? I'll stuff the envelopes, Lord. You want that person to be out in the boat this afternoon and me to be back here slaving at the cooker? I'll do that, Lord.'"

Loved ones, it's true, really it is. And you know it's true, because you've experienced little bits of it. That every time you take that attitude, there's a power that comes into you. That's resurrection life. That's the Holy Spirit. It's possible to live your whole life that way.

If you want death life, well, just follow Howard Hughes, "I've never done anything in this life but what I wanted to do. I've never done anything in this life that I didn't want to do." That's it. Live that way and the death life will pour through you and you become a miserable creature that has no friends, that is loved neither by God nor man. Loved ones, if you live that way, you'll eventually destroy yourself. If you live just to do what I want to do, if you govern your whole life by that, the death life will tear you apart. You'll be filled with ulcers and hypertension and then on the final day, there'll be darkness and loneliness and separation from the dear Father of

lights.

To receive resurrection life? O, Jesus said, "My meat..." Meat is something that you need, you can't do without, you have to have it every day. "My meat is to do the will of him that sent me." If you want the power of this resurrection life pulsing through your personality and your body, would you stop living the way you want? Will you stop buying the car you want? Would you stop taking the job that you want? Would you stop trying to get your way at home, get your way with your roommate, get your way in personal relationships and would you begin to say, "Lord God, you made me for a purpose like you made the birds. Father, what is that purpose? I want to do that, Lord." And every time an opportunity comes to be Jesus to somebody, be it. Loved ones, if you're that, there's a resurrection life that will come into you, really.

I used to get mad when I was a teenager, at my dad, because the fella always was helping other people. Or when there was a battle at home, he was the one that gave in, he was the one that submitted. He was always the one who was giving or giving in. And I would say to him, "Dad, they'll destroy you if you keep on at it." And you know, he had always more energy and more life than all the rest of us. And it was like that right up until he died. He always had more life and energy than the rest of us who were protecting ourselves, and defending ourselves, and trying to keep ourselves comfortable. Loved ones, that's the secret. If you're game to lose your life for his sake, you'll find it and that resurrection life will begin to pour through. I guarantee it, loved ones, I guarantee it.

So, I don't know, are some of you a wee bit wizened? Just little gnarled, tied-up, knotted little creatures you who are busy defending yourself and, "I'm going to watch my corner?" Well, loved ones, why not sink it today? Why not see that that leads to one thing. It leads to the kind of end that Howard Hughes experienced. It really does. That's the way you end up when you're always defending yourself from inconveniences, always trying to avoid anything that will put you out, and always wanting your way in this life. There's another dear Person, who is alive at this moment here in this auditorium, and he's alive because he lived a different way, and he's willing to give that to you.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus, thank you for Easter Sunday. Thank you for it, Lord, because it's not a memorial day. Thank you, Lord Jesus that you're here. Thank you Lord that we're not at the mercy of that stream of death life that destroys everything it touches and that has murdered that dear man that you made at the beginning, that dear fella, Howard Hughes, that you enabled to be born as a little fresh new baby. Father that we're not at the mercy of that death life that destroyed him, but that your resurrection life, Lord Jesus, can come into us through the power of the Holy Spirit this very day, if we will begin to live for you, Father, for your will, not our own. If we will begin to live ready to face the awkward jobs, ready to take on the difficult tasks. If we are ready to stop defending ourselves and preserving our lives, if we're willing to lose them even for you, then you will enable us to find them. Thank you, Lord. Thank you. Amen.