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Everything Has Changed

Text: St. John 20:1-18

According to the eminent contemporary philosopher, Charles Taylor, when it is said that we live in a secular age, we should not think that religious belief in general is waning, for it most certainly is not. What is the case, though, in an age such as ours is that the option of whether to believe or not is wide open; so apparently is the option about what to believe. Thus in the two thousand years since the first Easter, when faith in the Resurrection was what first and foremost marked Christian faith, things have changed. We have seen the rise of several non-Christian religions in places where there used to be only Christianity and perhaps Judaism. We have also seen religions that are offshoots of Christianity such as Mormonism or the Jehovah's Witnesses, religions whose roots are Christian but who also have enough of a kick in their gallop as to be no longer considered Christian, at least by other Christians. We have also seen numerous variations on traditional belief within Christianity that do not hold much relation to traditional belief at all. In some cases, for instance, the resurrection has disappeared from belief, or it is no longer central. In some of these cases, belief has become quite amorphous. Woody Allen, for example, once professed that he did believe in a higher intelligence that existed throughout the universe, except in certain parts of New Jersey. For some that is all that they believe. And in other cases, belief in the resurrection, while still held, has been so trivialized that it plays no defining role in faith at all. Garrison Keillor, for example, told the story of how a new young substitute priest at Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility in Lake Wobegon decided that the faith needed pepping up. Thus one Easter morning, worshipers were greeted with a large poster of a water skier on the

altar, with the following slogan written in large letters beneath it: “He’s Up!” For some, that is the depth of their belief.

In the ancient Church, however, Christian faith was quite specific, and also something quite uncompromised. It was faith in the Resurrection, above and beyond all else that it was. *All* the New Testament writers are quite clear about that. But what does that mean to say that faith is faith in the Resurrection?

Well, one way at getting at what the early church meant is first to say something about what it didn’t mean. It didn’t mean that the Resurrection was anything like water skiing. Nor was the Resurrection like anything in the natural realm. It was not like chicks hatching from eggs, it was not like the rebirth of dormant plants in the spring. Nor was faith in the Resurrection anything like a cult of people who happened to just believe that a dead man, Jesus, came back to life. Jesus had raised dead people, and nobody had religious faith in their resurrection. Nor was the Resurrection the apotheosis of a great teacher, nor was it something that made up for the embarrassment of Jesus’ tragic death on Good Friday.

No, what faith in the Resurrection meant for the ancient church was simply that they believed that the world had changed. They believed that the world was different that first Easter Sunday than it had been just a week before when Jesus paraded into Jerusalem. It was different than it had been Friday morning. How was it different? Well, for starters, sin and death on Good Friday had been conquered in Christ’s death, and now on this Easter Sunday, the dead Christ was alive. The one who died for us was alive; the one who loved the world even to the point of death was now alive and now is the one running the show, the whole show. *That* is how the world had changed. It was different than it was last week, and because it was different those who had faith in the Resurrection understood that they could live life differently than they had last week.

How?

Well, to get a contemporary sense of how things changed, consider a phrase that has become a cliché over the last few years. Everywhere we go, people say, “Everything has changed since September 11.” Well, indeed, many things have changed since the destruction of the World Trade Center, and the ramming of the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. For example, I remember that I actually was scheduled to fly out of Newark Airport on September 12; needless to say, I didn’t. But when on Friday the airports were finally open again, things really had changed in them. For the first time in American airports, there were soldiers patrolling those airports with rifles. Things had changed for the soldiers themselves, too. As I looked at them, it was apparent that these very young men and women had signed up for the National Guard not long before, hoping just to get college paid for in exchange for going to summer camp. Now they were patrolling airports with rifles. It wouldn’t be long before they would be doing back to back tours of duty in some far off desert. All those are big changes. Things had changed, too, in that we discovered that we had a whole set of new enemies. As a result security everywhere has been tightened, and what we once did freely, we now do under watchful eyes and supervision, and we don’t particularly resent it, given the alternative. Resent it or not, this increased security has had its effects. Everything is at least much more of a hassle.

Yet, deep down things may not have really changed that much at all. All that may have changed is simply that the warning level has gone up. For the fact of the matter is that before September 11, we were also worried about violence; the worry just wasn’t as present to our minds before then as it is now. Violence has just become more obvious, and we have had to realize that it was nearer than we had suspected before. Still, violence has always been a part of our lives and that has not changed.

Consider here the contentions of the English philosopher of the seventeenth century, Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes argued strenuously that the natural state of human beings is to be at war with each other; it is ingrained in our very physiology. The proof that we really are at war with each other and that we know it, Hobbes thought, can be seen simply in the fact that we have locks on our doors to keep ourselves and our possessions safe. Locks are a declaration of a state of war. Hobbes thought we needed to acknowledge this, and then design a political system that could make our lives something other than nasty, poor, brutish and short, all of which is the result of force perpetually being directed against us. This system, he argued, needed to be a system where there is a central authority that has both sufficient power to enforce law, that is, it needs to have more power than all the little warring powers so that it can control them; the central authority also needs to have the sovereign right to make law, without being subject to it.

So things have not really changed that much since 9/11. What has changed is simply our awareness of the ways of the world, and perhaps a rediscovered fondness for the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes.

But now consider a comment made at some point in the last eight years by the well known Christian ethicist, Stanley Hauerwas. When Stan heard for what was probably the umpteenth time the argument that everything had changed since 9/11, he simply replied, “Hell, I thought everything changed two thousand years ago.”

Meaning? That the fears on which we base our lives, and on which we have always based our lives, were taken away two thousand years ago in the Resurrection. Meaning that we don’t, despite what Hobbes thought, have to live that way anymore.

Consider here an argument put forth sixteen hundred years ago by St. Augustine. Augustine argued that humans have a sense of a supreme good that they desire. However, we

never pursue it very completely, nor do we believe that we can pursue it completely as long as we live in fear of violence and accident. We believe, therefore, that before we can launch ourselves out into grand life projects, we first have to protect ourselves, and ensure our safety and survival, physically, psychologically, socially. So we rein in our aspirations for a perfect good, and we are careful, and we settle for limited goods. We rank guarding ourselves and our things more highly than risking ourselves for what ranks above everything. We rarely put ourselves on the line for others, because we are so worried about what will happen to us if we do. We don't know if we can trust others, anyhow. Entertaining others, after all, brings the unexpected and unanticipated into our lives, and we don't know if we would like that. In short, we are careful and we are scared of pursuing the very good that we want and that we think alone can fulfill our lives. We pass the fear onto our children, and we teach them to secure themselves before they give themselves. We teach them to live well-meaning, but truncated lives, just as we have lived them. We gild those lives to make them more palatable and to make the fear less obvious. We gild them to make them pleasurable even; still, they are truncated lives, and a self-interested second best becomes our chief goal.

But, Augustine continued, in the death and resurrection of Christ, we have been shown a new way to go. We have on Good Friday, the death of death that takes place on the Cross. On Easter when God raises the dead Son we are now given the freedom to do the good that we know we ought to do because we now know that death is not something to be feared. That is a good we always worried that we would be chopped down for, if we risked going for it. But now, Augustine proclaims, we can risk going for it. We do not have to fear.

Jesus was once described by one contemporary theologian rather simply and strikingly as one who was uniquely free to do good. The point of so describing him can be put this way: We

are for the most part pretty good people, and we generally know what is good. We are especially good to those who are close to us, but we also know that if somebody, some stranger or mere acquaintance hurts, that he deserves sympathy, or that if someone is lonely or shunned, that she needs a friend. But we are rarely free enough to give that sympathy, or to be that friend, especially if it is threatening to us in any way; if giving, for example, threatens our social standing, our careers, our time or our treasure, or, most important, our self image. And because we are not so free, we don't do the things we know deep down should be done.

Simply watch teenagers. If someone needs a friend, but is thought to be weird by others, they tend to shy away from befriending her, because one might in turn be thought to be weird, or catch cooties, and thus to lose social standing. Fragile self images are easily threatened, and so the young tend to be social conservatives and take few risks, despite their reputations. Adults aren't a lot different. We worry because we think we run the risk of losing our place in the line advancing to the goal of life, as it were. But Jesus wasn't like that. He wasn't afraid, and as a result he was free to do good.

Often the dividing line between what Jesus did as the work of the Father and what we do is only the one of being free. It is not talent or money or power or anything else. It is simply freedom. In his case he didn't mind the risk; in fact, the only risk he seemed to worry about was the one of not doing the good that needed to be done. Unlike others, he was free from the inside out; we are so afraid of what is outside of us, that we lose our inner selves. Thus he was free even to die, to die even for those people who were risky propositions. The point of Easter is to vindicate on God's part the choice of that kind of life.

Now, I hasten to point out, important as it is, by itself the Easter vindication of Jesus' way of life in self-giving doesn't necessarily change everything. It may just point out the eternal

difference between the divine and the merely human. But what happens at Easter isn't *just* a matter of vindicating that choice of life. There is also on Easter and then at Pentecost the freeing and unleashing of a spiritual power among women and men which gives them that very same power that is Christ's – the same power because it gives us Christ himself. That power gives us his life, if we are willing to risk sharing in his generous death for the good of others, and in giving us his life it gives us the power to be willing to risk everything. It gives the reality of the ultimate good we hope for.

That then is how everything has changed. That is what the ancient church believed, and that is how the ancient church was empowered, and how it was spiritually energized. That was how it was able, as the Book of Acts described the apostles, “to turn the world upside down.”

I don't know that we have to turn the world upside down. I don't know that we even know any longer what it would mean to do so. We talk a lot about change, and it is difficult any longer to know what it means. What I do know this morning is that we no longer have to be afraid the way we were afraid a week ago, or three days ago. I do know that we do not have to succeed in the ways that we thought we had to last week, because Good Friday shows how limited those ways of success really are. I do know, too, that we can be challenged to go out and do the good that we know ought to be done. Why can we do those things now? Because on this day we have been given in Christ's death and resurrection the power to be changed, the power to be changed into people who are not afraid of doing what is good for others, instead of just looking out for our self interests.

Often people come to churches on occasions such as this in order to receive consolation. Well, good. Churches can do that. But consolation is not the chief point of the resurrection or of churches. The chief point of the resurrection is to give us light – light to see who we are and

what we can become, and light to see the good that needs to be done, and light to show us the way to do it. It gives us light to see the supreme value of humility and self-sacrifice and light to see the poverty of self-interest and self-absorption and self-importance. It gives us the light to see the God who draws us into his own selfless life. Believe then in the Resurrection; proclaim it and use its light to no longer be afraid. Use it to do good, and to love God and your neighbor; use it to do the same humble, self-sacrificing good that led Jesus through the Cross to the Resurrection. Then without even knowing it, you will have changed; everything that really needs to be changed will be changed.