

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
3/31/2013, Easter Morning  
Isaiah 65:17-25, Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24, 1 Corinthians 15:19-26, Luke 24:1-12

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*At the start of the sermon, the minister says and the people answer:*

☐ Christ is risen! Alleluia!

☑ He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Let me begin by lifting up a verse from our First Lesson, from Isaiah 65:

<sup>20</sup>No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days... (Isaiah 65:20, RSV)

When the resurrection comes, how old do you suppose you will be? After all, our subject on this happy morning is no fairy tale. We are talking about real life because of Easter and what Jesus has accomplished—real life, and so we must be *some* age, *some* years old, in the resurrection. When the trumpet sounds, and the eastern sky splits, and Jesus commands the dead to rise again, how old will we be when we open our eyes and begin living with him?

Saint Thomas Aquinas figured we would be thirty-two or thirty-three years old.

I hope that life has been good for you and that you could rather run through your life in the manner of Frank Sinatra, be grateful for each season of life, and say of each one: It was a very good year.

When I was seventeen  
It was a very good year...

When I was twenty-one  
It was a very good year...

When I was thirty-five...

But now the days are short  
I'm in the autumn of the year...  
[Still] It was a very good year

I remember dear Margaret Stanschus, of blessed memory in this congregation, telling me that for her, life got better when she turned fifty. And she did seem to enjoy her older years. So be it. May each of your years be a very good year.

Still, I wonder: how old do you think you will be in the resurrection? Which of your good years do you think you will be resurrected as?

Saint Thomas had a nice argument in favor of age thirty-two or thirty-three. He seemed to feel that we human beings are somehow at our peak around then. In Chapter XII of his Catechism, Aquinas puts things this way:

All will rise again at the perfect age, namely, thirty-two or thirty-three years. The reason is that those who have not reached that age are not at the perfect age, and the old have already passed it. So young people and children will receive what they lack, and the old will be restored to what they have lost...<sup>1</sup>

I like this proposal. As I recall it, when I was thirty-three, it was a very good year indeed. Plus, that is the traditional age of our Lord Jesus. He died and rose again at age thirty-three. I'd like to be his age again.

## **THE GRIEF WE FEEL AT DEATH**

But there is a deeper and better reason for liking Aquinas' idea. It has to do with the grief we all feel at untimely deaths, and they *all* tend to feel untimely to the loved ones left behind. Isaiah points to our sorrow in our opening text:

*No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days... (Isaiah 65:20, RSV)*

No more! No more of this heartache! Did you know that there are prayers in the Minister's Manual for a child who dies before or at birth? Well there should be, for the grief of mother and father can be very deep for their little one they had so little chance to know. And my! What sorrow there is in the world and in the church when a child dies. Think of all those funerals up in Newtown, CT. If ever there were *untimely* deaths, those were among them. Life will be forever changed and made sorrowful for many parents and grandparents by those little deaths.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Aquinas. *The Aquinas Catechism: A Simple Explanation of the Catholic Faith by the Church's Greatest Theologian*. Kindle Edition.

But Easter means that the murder of those children will not stop them from flourishing—that the gunman’s wickedness cannot reach all the way to heaven. He believes that those children cannot be robbed of full life in the kingdom of Jesus.

## **WHEN THEY WERE YOUNG**

Going in the other direction, toward old age, you might have been blessed to meet an elderly person who delights you. Though his hair is white or her step feeble, still you recognize a dignity and beauty in that one. Just imagine if you could have known him, known her back when they were thirty-three. I often think of that at funerals. I have been pastor here for a fairly good long time now— twenty-one years— which means that I have watched children grow up right before my eyes. And I have buried saints of our congregation I knew and admired during these twenty-one years. But also I have thought to myself, “My! I wish I had known this person when he was thirty-three, when she was thirty-three. I bet he was great! I bet she was great!”

Well, according to Aquinas’s idea, I will get to know Max Petschek, for example, when he was young and strong. And that will be a joy.

## **WE HAVE BEEN GRANTED A GREAT HOPE**

What I am doing in these pious speculations is rejoicing in what Jesus has done for us this past week and especially on Easter morning. He has granted a great hope to the Church: at the cost of his own precious body and blood, he has granted to us the hope of the resurrection of the body. And that is a hope that will not fail us.

In the end, I wonder whether Aquinas has figured this all out perfectly. Especially I have my doubts when I think about the untimely death of children. If it were up to me, I would not want them to be resurrected at age thirty-three, because I do not want them to have missed their childhood. What a wonderful time of life that is! What a joy it was for my wife, Carol, and me to watch our boys when they were children. They looked happy and carefree and delighted with life in a way we grown-ups can hardly match. They would laugh and wrestle and spring out of bed in the morning happy to face another day. I want all children to have the experience of having good childhoods. Let them reach age thirty-three, yes, but let them have many good years before that.

And likewise, I am old now, but I am not all that sure I would like to return to age thirty-three. I have some peace now that I never had when I was young. I have a larger perspective on things, and though I loved being thirty-three, I also love being old. And then, for some people, their thirties are a tough season of life, to be more or less endured and waited through till times get better.

So, we are just going to have to leave that to Jesus, what age we will be in the resurrection. But here is my happy point on Easter morning: We are going to be *some* age — some good and strong age — in the resurrection, because Jesus is going to make it so for us.

## THE OBJECTIVITY OF EASTER

Let me try to explain why this is so important to me and why I am bragging about it this Easter morning: Thanks to Easter, you and I are going to be raised to life again. We will be *some* age—maybe thirty-three, maybe some other age, who knows? But when we talk about Easter, we are talking about *real* life. We are talking about seeing again those we now mourn—seeing them with our own eyes and throwing our arms around them again, as Mary Magdalene so very naturally wanted to hug Jesus that first Easter morning. Easter is about life and good old-fashioned bodies. It is not about ghosts and clouds and harps and so on. It is about Jesus alive and fighting for life. And it is about you and me using our bodies here and now to fight on his side.

Jesus died a brutal death. We know that. We just lived through it again during this past Holy Week. But he arose back to life, and that is a very sweet word: Life! What a joyful question it is, for example, those angels ask the women at the tomb:

Why do you look for the *living* among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. (Luke 24:5, RSV)

Jesus is alive and kicking. He did not rise as some noble idea or principle. No he arose as a vigorous, strong man determined to use his strength and his goodness to fight for our world.

When Jesus opened his eyes that first Easter morning, the darkness of death fled from him, and he dove back into his work of saving the world. And this time, nothing will stop him. Nothing *can* stop him. Neither powers or principalities, things present or things to come, not even our faith or lack of faith can stop him in his great work of bring life and light to this world of ours.

He died that you and might live and help him in his battle for life. He wants us to live even now, live abundantly, live kicking and fighting for the life of others. He wants us to throw off those unhealthy habits or unworthy vices, so that we can maximize our life and our ability to help others to live. Jesus rose and lives again that we will have life now and forevermore, that we will cherish each day, live and work and look forward to seeing our loved ones again and to not be embarrassed to see them again, but ready to say, “I took the years left to me, and I used them for the good fight of life, in the name of our Risen Lord

Jesus,” to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

*At the end of the sermon, the minister repeats:*

☐ Christ is risen! Alleluia!

☑ He is risen indeed! Alleluia!