

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/27/2016, Easter Sunday
1 Corinthians 15:19-26, John 20:1-18

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

☐ Christ is risen! Alleluia!

☑ **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

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

For my opening text, I am drawn to this morning's Epistle Lesson. St. Paul states his theme in the opening verse of our Lesson, and it is a large-scale Easter theme. The apostle says this:

¹⁹If *for this life only* we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1 Corinthians 15:19, NRSV)

Hoping for “this life only” is too small a thing — too feeble for the majesty of Easter. The resurrection of Jesus lets loose on earth — I am speaking of our good, old earth! — hope that goes beyond these three-score and ten years. And so Easter offers adventure and goodness in this *present life* — a kind of radiance reaching from heaven back to us, here and now. This is my main idea this Easter morning: It is because our hopes are not limited to this life that we can afford to strive for some mighty goodness in the years granted to us.

It is characteristic of love that it is willing to spend itself on forlorn causes.¹ Love does not rest content with that which is easy, but is willing to strive for extraordinary goodness, figuring that eternity can make up for any blows suffered along the way.

Let me give you an example. Let me tell you about Father Damien. I learned this story from the most recent Christmas letter from an old clergy friend back in Pennsylvania. It seems that my old friend is showing early symptoms of Parkinson's Disease. His left hand trembles. He carries his arm. It is becoming harder for him to type at a computer. But he remains cheerful, continues to love parish ministry, and means to paddle on as long as he can. So, in his Christmas letter he told us about these things and told us the story of Father Damien. It is a story that encourages him. I read, then, a passage from the Christmas letter:

Most of all, we have God's promise of the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come. Last year when I was in Hawaii I visited Molokai Island. It became famous in the late 1800's as a leper colony. People who contracted leprosy

¹ Gilbert C. Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, Indiana, 1984), page 32.

were brought by boat to the island and left there to fend for themselves. The place became a sinkhole of disease, despair, and death. To this place of misery came in 1873 a priest: Fr. Damien deVeuster of Belgium. His ministry lasted sixteen years, until he himself contracted the disease and died of leprosy in 1889. He has been known ever since as St. Father Damien, the Leper Priest. At one point someone asked him, “Are you afraid of contracting the disease?” Fr. Damien replied: “Suppose the disease does take my body. God will give me a new one on Resurrection day.”

I’ve read a little more about Father Damien since receiving the letter. The governmental board of health supplied the lepers with food and clothing, but was unable in the beginning to provide them with either resident physicians or nurses. There was just Father Damien. He provided the consolations of the gospel to the lepers, but also “rendered them such little medical service and bodily comforts as were within his power. He dressed their ulcers, helped them erect their cottages, and went so far as to dig their graves and make their coffins.”² He himself began to show the symptoms of leprosy in 1885, but he carried on another four years until he became helpless and died shortly afterwards at age forty-nine. “Suppose the disease does take my body. God will give me a new one on Resurrection day.” Love is willing to spend itself on forlorn causes because it measures the good that lies before it against eternity and judges it worthwhile.

There is an African American spiritual we sometimes sing here at Immanuel that speaks of Jesus:

In the morning when I rise,
in the morning when I rise,
in the morning when I rise,
give me Jesus.

Refrain

Give me Jesus,
give me Jesus.
You may have all the rest,
give me Jesus.

If Jesus be risen from the dead, then give me Jesus. You may have all the rest. Give me Jesus! Then, as Psalm 27 says:

² *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Father Damien,
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04615a.htm>

³Though a host encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war arise against me,
yet I will be confident.

Wasn't something like this at work in the ministry of Martin Luther King Jr. The task set before him was immense: that one day we shall all be judged "not by the color of our skin but by the content of our character." It was a colossal task, perhaps a forlorn task, for which he did not live to see the day. Yet he had a vision of it, and since he was a man of faith, I like to believe that eternity sustained him in his work. "Though a host encamp against me, my heart shall not fear." If Christ be risen, then I trust in him to be at my side, and so, let's get on with it! Let's get on with some extraordinary goodness in this world.

In our usual Sunday morning liturgy, during the Holy Communion, we come across a line in the Great Thanksgiving that speaks of the Holy Spirit. It identifies the Holy Spirit with the spirit of Jesus and "of his resurrection." It goes this way:

☐ Send now, we pray, your Holy Spirit, *the spirit of our Lord and of his resurrection*, that we who receive the Lord's body and blood may live to the praise of your glory and receive our inheritance with all your saints in light.

It is a surprising way to talk — as if the resurrection of our Lord has spirit and power — or *gives* spirit and power. "The spirit of our Lord and *of his resurrection*." And yet I believe that this is a good and a wise prayer. Easter should arouse people to new possibilities. There is *power* in our faith that Jesus is resurrected, "the first fruits of those who have died" (1 Corinthians 15:20). If Jesus be risen, then we shall be too, and compared to that eternity, any blows we should suffer along the way of goodness are well worth it.

I am not saying that you must be a believer in Christ in order to strive after some extraordinary goodness in this world. This world is blessed by the extraordinary deeds of many good people — both Christians and non-Christians. So, I am not saying that you must be a Christian in order to spend yourself on forlorn causes. But I *am* saying that if you *are* a believer in Christ, then it is time to turn to some extraordinary deeds of goodness in this world. If you are a Christian, you have been blessed with some strength that comes from your right to believe in the resurrection of the body.

Let me close this Easter sermon with a few words about what I mean by "some extraordinary deeds of goodness in this world." I do not necessarily mean heroic deeds — like ministry to a leper colony. But I do mean deeds that make best sense if heaven is true. I mean to include the everyday kinds of deeds that do not fit in a simple calculus of self-advantage. I am speaking of good deeds that are swept along by eternity — by the notion that it is worthwhile to spend yourself and to exhaust yourself in various causes of love because Jesus is risen and he is on the

side of love. I mean to praise the railroad conductor, for example, who walks up and down the Long Island railroad, all day long, year after year, being pleasant to people, doing her job with care, because she has a family to support, and she wants to be good to people on the train. I mean, the policeman who stands in the intersection on a hot summer day, with car fumes all over the place, directing traffic, because directing traffic will make things better for everyone. I mean the husbands and the wives who are true to one another day after day, year after year, even into old age, because they promised each other that they would do so and they promised God that they would do so, and they live in consciousness of those promises. I mean the child who tends her sick mother because she loves her mother and that's how things should be in God's world.

The apostle speaks of pity:

¹⁹If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1 Corinthians 15:19, NRSV)

And yet there is no need to pity us. Grey-haired saints as well as newcomers to Christ would not change a thing. We are built for good deeds, the Bible says, that we might walk therein (Ephesians 2:10). The resurrection of Jesus is a joy because it says to us, "walk therein!" Go ahead, walk in good deeds. Spend yourself even in forlorn causes. Do not let yourself be provoked into meanness or revenge. Rejoice in the resurrection of Jesus and let your rejoicing take the form of love and goodness in this world, to the benefit of our neighbors and to the glory of our Savior Jesus Christ, together 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!**