

The Resurrection: Preaching “This Ferocious Moment”

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“This ferocious moment” is the phrase Reynolds Price uses to describe the resurrection in his story “The Foreseeable Future” (in the collection by the same title, Ballentine Books, 1992, pp. 69-222). Price’s story is about a man named Whitley Wade, who died on World War II’s D-Day; a quart of his blood and pulverized bone laid down in a green French pasture. But the medics brought him back, at least as far back as medics can. Now he is back home, back to his family, back at work, but far from back to life. While traveling on business he sits in a Thanksgiving for Victory worship service and studies a stained glass window, “a risen Christ, stepping out of the tomb. Christ’s hips were hardly covered with rags; his palms were outward, displaying their ruin. His side was bleeding and his lips were very nearly smiling. It came as a shock to Whit — that threat of a smile, the first he’d seen in a hundred pictures of this ferocious moment” (p. 137).

The resurrection, a ferocious moment? That angle on it has never appeared in commentary or devotional writing. Good Friday is the ferocious moment, when God in Christ dies: the earth shakes, the sun hides, and the future of the cosmos hangs unsure. On Holy Saturday, as the little band of worshipers, not many more perhaps than were together on the original Holy Saturday, made their way by candlelight from the graveyard into the unlit nave, the choirmaster said, “This is it. This is the ferocious moment.” Indeed, it was chilling and fearsome, that moment of entry.

Resurrection is glad, smiling. Why should Whitley Wade be shocked to see the threat of a smile on Jesus’ face as he comes out of the tomb? And why is the smile a threat? Is he right that this picture is one out of a hundred, the exception, not the rule, to show Jesus with a smile at his resurrection? Perhaps the artists intuitively have known this all along about the resurrection moment. It simply didn’t seem right to put even the hint of a smile on Jesus’ face. The evidence in the art books from the church library and the pictures of Christ rising from the tomb which hang above the altar in two churches I have served confirm Whitley Wade’s observation. Not even the threat of a smile could be detected in this admittedly subjective investigation.

The Christ in this one picture out of a hundred has the threat of a smile on his lips. Why is that such a shock though? As Wade looks at the stained glass he thinks, “The man looked glad. Glad? What working man ever laid down to sleep and wanted to rise” (pp. 137-8)?

There is a point we preachers may have forgotten. We have lost touch with the women and men who plow the fields, build bridges, assemble automobiles, clean hospital rooms, and do all the other back breaking and exhausting labor. And if we have not exactly lost touch it is still easy to forget the feeling of what it is like to do those jobs day after day after day. An iron worker commented, “It seems like I put my boots on, go to work, come home and take my boots off, eat, and the next thing I know it’s time to put my boots on again.” What working person ever laid down to sleep and wanted to rise?

Of course the problem is greater than physical exhaustion. As he looks at the window “the bitter dregs of Whit’s long war rushed up in his throat. And even...the

end of his actual fight and these slow prayers of thanks and praise could not turn the poison that burned his mouth and flooded his mind. Whit Wade was not the man to raise. Who signed their license to haul me back? Not me, not Whit. Whit Wade tried to leave” (p. 138).

The resurrection is a ferocious moment for Whit and the smile on Jesus’ face is a threat rather than the hint of a smile because the process of being called from death to life is ferocious for Whitley Wade. It would be easier to lay it down.

We spend so much Sunday time talking about eternal life and even what difference faith in Jesus Christ will mean for how we die. That is the necessary first discussion, to be sure. The order into which our baptism initiates us is death and then life. But if the first question is what difference our faith in Jesus Christ will mean for how we die, the second necessary question is what difference that faith makes for how we now live.

There are times in our lives when we are far from being back to life, when it would be easier just to lay it down. It doesn’t take a war necessarily to put us there. And the laying it down does not have to be as extreme as the suicide Whit Wade was contemplating. For some fantasizing about suicide is a way out. Many retreat from life in more socially acceptable ways: alcohol, hours of mind-numbing TV, going through the motions on the job, waiting for retirement, etc.

The daily engagement with life can be frightening. We fear failure. We fear negative evaluation. We usually can muster the courage necessary to face those momentous times in our lives. It is in the day by day, the routine, that courage flags and people withdraw from life. A time comes when life is no longer exciting possibilities in store, but a storehouse of boring or frightening unknowns. If a person has already lived through one or two of the latter, she might not want to risk any more. Being called from death to life is a struggle. It is ferocious.

Whit Wade does come back. What helped? “The actual world had called him back — people, objects, and the [God] he prayed to — and now he’d obeyed,” is how Price writes it (p. 208). He comes back for others. “Go where they can use you,” Whit says to himself as he heads for home (p. 209).

Jesus, the working man, laid down to rest from his labors. The God he prayed to raised him; people, things, the whole cosmos called him back. He obeyed. He got back up for our sakes. And he smiles over this blessedly ferocious event. He too went back to where they could use him. He calls us back from death to life, for life eternal to be sure. He also calls us back for life in this day right in front of us: to live for others, to go to where they can use us, to coax others back to life.