

Pastor Anna Madsen runs the Spent Dandelion retreat center outside of Two Harbors and is a teaching theologian within our ELCA. She spoke at a clergy conference hosted here in November, and she shared there this little story about an experience she had while serving as a Parish Pastor. The Mom of one of the young people soon to be confirmed hurried into her office one morning and said, “What’s your favorite Bible verse?” Without hesitation, Pastor Anna replied, “Well, it would have to be from the Resurrection story in the Gospel of Luke---” “Why do you seek the living among the dead? Christ is not here; He is risen!” As it happened, the Mom went away somewhat annoyed, because she’d hoped for a shorter verse, one that could fit on a Confirmation sheet cake. What struck me, though, was the content of Pastor Anna’s choice for a favorite verse---I hadn’t heard that quoted as anyone’s favorite verse before. It makes all the sense in the world, though, because as a teaching theologian, Pastor Anna is all about resurrection. The leading question she often asks is something like, “Since Christ is risen from the dead and God has defeated death and the devil, what will we, as Christians, do about it?” She has an invigorating and hope-oriented theology as a result of her resurrection emphasis, and she also fits in very nicely with St. Paul, whose theology is also all about resurrection. In fact, in today’s lesson from 1st Corinthians, Paul makes the claim that the resurrection of Christ is the absolutely fundamental center of the Christian faith, without which, Christianity is meaningless.

This is a provocative claim on Paul’s part. Let’s think this through a bit. I think it’s fair to say that all of us experience our faith in a way that is personal and

distinctive to who we are. Which is entirely appropriate when we speak about a God who meets us where we are. All of us have an individual center to our Christian faith and life, and it may or may not be the resurrection of Christ. Some of us, for example, relate primarily to God through Creation, and we're actually Creation centered Christians. Some of relate to God primarily through the Incarnation of Christ; we base our faith on the reality of Emmanuel, on the premise that God is with us. Others relate to a God who suffers with them and for them, to Christ on the Cross, and they are more Cross Centered Christians. Others relate primarily to God as Holy Spirit, and they are more likely to be charismatic Christians in flavor. See what I mean? We're not all cookie cutter Christians, we're each unique. And our favorite Bible verse or stories might actually tend to reflect where we personally find our Christian faith to be centered. I think all of this is absolutely appropriate and good and reflects how God relates to us individually, rather than as if we were all entirely the same in our spiritual make up.

However, Paul and probably Pastor Anna Madsen, have a weighty and important theological point to make, *regardless* of where our Christianity tends personally to center. Whether we are Creation or Incarnation or Cross centered, whether Christmas or Good Friday or Easter speak to us the most loudly, we can all still proclaim the crucial importance of Christ not only Incarnate; of Christ not only suffering on the cross, but of Christ as risen Lord. The resurrected Christ matters hugely to our faith. Here's why.

All four of the Gospels, our earliest written sources to the life of Christ, insist upon the literal death and resurrection of our Lord. They do not precisely agree in all

of the details surrounding these events—what Jesus said from the cross, for example, varies in each Gospel, or how many angels there were at the tomb, and so on. But, they do all insist that Jesus was truly dead, not just shamming or in a drug-induced coma. And that he truly rose; the tomb on Easter was literally empty, because he had physically been raised from the dead. It's a crazy, radical claim, and all of them make it. So do the first witnesses to the resurrection and the oral traditions about the resurrection. And so does Paul, who met the risen Lord on the Road to Damascus in a life-changing conversion experience. Nevertheless, the audaciousness of this claim was a cause for offense and rejection. Paul is making this argument we read this morning to the church in Corinth because some or many therein were saying that there was no resurrection. They just didn't believe it! He begins, "How can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation and your faith have been in vain." It's not difficult to understand why the Corinthians were struggling with this concept; none of them had been first hand witnesses to the risen Lord. They weren't Jews, they didn't live in Palestine; they lived in Corinth and were part of a grand and sweeping Greco-Roman culture; from their perspective, why on earth would God raise this lowly Jewish peasant from the dead, rather than, say, a Roman emperor? It just didn't compute to them. And since apart from Jesus, whenever someone is truly dead, they stay dead, it may not compute for us either. We may also struggle with our understanding or belief in the resurrection, but Paul maintains that the struggle is necessary. Because without the resurrection of Christ, he maintains that the Christian faith loses its unique and hope-

giving authenticity. Paul's thinking runs this way: if Christ isn't raised, then God hasn't conquered death, sin, and the devil. If Christ isn't raised, then neither shall we be. If Christ isn't raised, our faith is in a teacher and a prophet, but not in God incarnate in Christ. Which makes the Christian faith just like many other faiths that center around a charismatic teacher or prophet, and no longer unique. If Christ isn't raised, Paul contends, instead of being fools for Christ, we're just plain fools.

So, let's consider how Paul and Pastor Anna's resurrection emphasis might play out in real life. Last Wednesday morning I drove up to Silver Bay to visit Roy Mattson in the Veteran's Home. I learned he'd been moved there into hospice care on Sunday evening, and other scheduled activities and repeated snow fall prevented me from visiting until Wednesday morning. He was basically unresponsive at that point, but we are told that sometimes people can still hear, even when they appear unresponsive. So, I loudly carried on a monologue with Roy at his bedside. (I felt a little foolish, but I've done way dumber things for love, haven't you?) I told him that our congregation was praying for him, that people were asking after him, and that we missed him. *All of which was true.* I told him that we were all grateful for his service to our country and that he was a hero. *Also true.* Then I thought about what Scripture lesson I'd like to read to him and what kind of prayer I'd like to say for him. I felt I should read the Shepherd's Psalm, Psalm 23, which is so comforting and speaks of God shepherding us throughout life, and through the valley of death into life with God in eternity. Was *that* true? It is, if Christ is risen. If Christ is not risen, then it's a little sketchy, isn't it? And after I read those sacred, ancient words of Psalm 23, the prayer that seemed to come naturally to me included asking God to bring Roy home; gently,

swiftly, and surrounded by angels. Because death seems like a homecoming to me in these kinds of instances. *Was that true?* Again, it is, if Christ is risen. If Christ is not risen, then it's a little sketchy, isn't it? My point is that how we think about dying is impacted by our belief about resurrection, and death is somewhere we all go, not only personally, but with those we love who precede us in death. We face mortality all the time, and the older we get, the more often we face it. That's *why* resurrection matters; it's not just a theological nuance, it shapes how we understand how and where our journey ends----in the grave? Or in resurrected eternity? Whatever that may mean and however it may look? Beyond that, our belief about Christ's resurrection matters even apart from the bedtimes of the dying. Because if Christ is raised; if God has defeated death, sin and the devil; then we don't have to be afraid of the journey's end anymore. We don't have to spend our life's journey putting lots of energy into denial or band aids or escape of the plain fact of our mortality anymore. We might even say with St. Paul, as he does in Romans 8, "If Christ is for me, who is against me? If God is on my side, what does it matter who or what else comes up against me?" An attitude which fosters hope and empowerment, rather than despair or paralysis. The way we view resurrection most certainly impacts how we see the end of our journey, and not only the end, but the journey itself; because knowing the end of the story can impact how we live out the story.

Let's think about all the ways that knowing the end of our story impacts how we're living out our story in the here and now. Let's think of all the in-breakings of resurrection that we experience. Not just at Easter or at death, but now. Let's think about the "little Easters", if you will, that come at any time of year, and that give us

pause and make us question the cynicism and fatalism of our culture at large. I can point to two right at hand---it felt strange to me to pick an Easter bulletin cover and an Easter sermon song for worship on Feb. 17. I mean, what business do Easter lilies and glad Easter music have showing up in the midst of the wintriest winter that I can remember for some years? We're either watching the mercury plummet to new lows or firing up the snow blower yet again. If I don't have to shovel off our deck at home for the rest of the winter, it will still be too soon. I've run out of places to shovel the snow on to. This winter would seem to be emblematic of all that looks to persuade us that Christ is not risen, God is dead or absent, hope is gone, humanity and our world are doomed. But our cover and hymn reflect the Scripture lesson assigned for today, a lesson that has year round implications, not just Easter morning implications. Simply hearing Paul's strong and bracing words become a little Easter for me, a trumpet blast that makes me sit up and take notice. Furthermore, both my Christmas cactuses are blooming now, for reasons best known to themselves, and their blossoms feed my spirit. And the music we hear every Sunday here makes my heart sing. And the strength of our community of faith as we pull together in joy or in sorrow could possibly make a believer out of the most skeptical atheist. The good will I encounter amongst us daily is a constant encouragement to my soul. And sometimes, when I'm skiing through snow covered pines, I experience a profound gratitude for my life in northern Minnesota and don't even wish myself on a beach in Cancun. Little Easters. Little in breakings of resurrection. I do experience them. How about you? I'm betting that you most certainly do, and that this is one of the reasons you are a part of a worshipping Christian community, claiming and celebrating Christ's resurrection,

even if we sometimes struggle with it. Because how else do we explain these little Easters apart from the One glorious Easter? How else do we interpret these in breakings of resurrection and hope apart from the power of the rising of Christ from the dead? As we read in Luke's Gospel, "Why look for the living among the dead? Christ is not here. He is risen." So, there is hope. Death does not have the last word. God defeats death, sin, and the devil. And if that's true, what else is there, ultimately, to fear? Christ *is* risen, and our faith is not in vain. Amen.