“Jesus Is Victor!” An Easter Sermon on Ephesians 2:1-2, 4-6

By Eduard Thurneysen

And you did he make alive, when ye were dead through your trespasses and sins, wherein ye once walked according to the course of this world . . . But God, being rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ and raised us up with him and made us to sit in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.— Ephesians 2:1-2, 4-6.

What is Easter? The Bible answers: resurrection, resurrection of Jesus from the dead; and that means: the living God, forgiveness of sins, the empty tomb, conquered death—in a word, Jesus is victor. But really, are these answers? Answers which we understand, with which we may do something. Are these clear, plain, understandable words, from which light streams forth? Are they not rather hard to understand, hazy words which follow one another, which only involve us in deeper enigmas? May we not say to ourselves, “We have had enough of these old questions, these enigmas of life which daily puzzle us? We do not care to deal with these old, nor with these newer, greater questions. Life is hard and dismal. We have little enough light; and we come to church that we may receive more light in order that the little light we have may not be made dimmer, or be stolen from us.”

Perhaps we are deep in doubt. We do not understand life and we do not understand ourselves. We are afraid of life. There are so many dark shadows around us that we can scarcely find the way. After all, is there really a way out? Does life have a meaning? And along comes Easter and says, “God, the living God, exists. God lives. God triumphs.” “Yes, that is the question,” you reply. “It is with this question that I struggle. That is which I do not understand, and no assumption of the Bible or of a preacher helps me over my difficulties. The darkness becomes extremely black just when you speak about that. Just then the question starts to burn as a freshly inflicted wound. The living God—if only I could grasp and understand that! If that would only speak to me!”

Or it may be you are not a brooding person. Your situation is quite different. You are an active, or, at least, an ambitious, striving, progressive person. But you chafe beneath your failures and weaknesses, and with all your progress they still cleave to you. Perhaps you have lived for years under the curse of a moral trespass. And no one knows why you secretly slip back into your old faults and feel so ashamed of yourself. Perhaps others know it, they can see it on you.” Anyway, it is a curse, an imprisonment in which you are held. You know: “There is a worm eating away at the roots of my life and it disturbs whatever might grow out of these roots.” And you do not know how to be done with it. You—your better self—are bound with chains to another, a baser I, which you must detest, and yet you cannot slough it off, because it belongs to you. You miserable person, who shall deliver you from the body of this death! And here comes Easter and says: “Forgiveness of sins! Broken chains! If God is for us, who can be against us!” “Yes,” you sigh, “how wonderful it would be, but it is just my burden, my misery, that I do not experience anything like that. This shout of joy cannot well up out of my own experience any more after all these countless failures which I have endured. Let shout who will, but rejoicing is not for me. On the contrary, forgiveness means freedom, and I first discover what chains and fences really are when we speak of freedom.”

Or, finally: We must die. The untold dark moment will come for us all, when the end comes, at the place where this world sinks away and where we have to bid farewell to the realities of this life with all of its lights and shades. Where do we go then? What will be left of us? From our position we can answer nothing. As far as our human thinking and living is concerned,
that is the last word. A gravemound, a few frail flowers, that is all that is left. O enigma of
dying, O enigma of life, which faces us at the exit of life. And yet, again Easter comes and
speaks the unheard of word about the conquest of death, the empty grave; and this word is for
us the most unheard of, and the hardest to believe. Who can understand it: where all ends,
there all really begins. Are we not tempted to say: “O, cease this talk, we have done once-for-
all with this terrible enigma of dying. You are ripping open the old wounds anew when you
.speak of it!”

The final summing up of all this which is told us at Easter is: Jesus is victor! Jesus—is it not
He who was born in humblest lowliness, who died on the cross crying the cry of a derelict of
God, He who forgave sins—but who collapsed under the burden of sin, He, the humble, smitten
by His fate; and of all those laden with grief, is He not the most burdened man of Nazareth?
And He is to be victor?

Yes, it is always a difficult, a dark truth, a word that scarcely can be tolerated by our ears—
that word “resurrection.” That is to say, it is not necessarily hazy. What it really means is
clear—too clear, plain —only too plain. It means what it says: something mighty, crystal-
clear, complete. It signifies: That is the world, that is life with its imprisonments and tragedies
of sorrow and of sin, life with its doubts and unanswered questions, life with its grave-mounds
and crosses for the dead, a unique enigma, so immense that all answers are silent before it.
Nothing, absolutely nothing, can one do' who is in this fate, sin and death, with its
thousandfold festering need; nothing can one do to stop it; everything is too insignificant to
fill up this vacuum. Admit it; it negates everything; there is no way out! There might be the
possibility of a miracle happening—no, not a miracle, but lie miracle, the miracle of God—
God’s incomprehensible, saving intervention and mercy, the all-inclusive renewal that leads
from death to life that comes from Him, God’s creation-word, God’s life-word—and that
means resurrection from the dead! Resurrection, not progress, not evolution, not
enlightenment, but what he word means, namely, a call from heaven to us: ‘Rise up! You are
dead, but I will give you life.”

That is what is proclaimed here, and it is the only way that the world can be saved. Take away
this summons, and make something else of it, something smaller, less than the absolute whole,
less than the absolute ultimate, or less than the absolutely powerful, and you have taken away
all, the unique, the last hope there is for us on earth.

Perhaps, we still allow the word “resurrection” to please us very well. Yes, we reach out our
eager hands towards it. Who is there that does not eagerly desire the promise of freedom, life
and hope for the future! But that which disturbs us and which we will not endure, which we
scarcely or absolutely will not and cannot admit, is the divine encroachment which all this
presupposes, and that is our distress, the awfulness of our chains, the imprisonment which we
suffer, from which there is no escape. We will gladly let anyone tell us about the love of God;
we rejoice when it is ardently proclaimed to us. But do we not see that all this is meaningless
patter, if we are not at the same time shocked as by a crash of lightning with a sense of the
depth of our lost condition to which the love of God had to stoop? We do not like
to see that
we are deeply imprisoned, and that it is true, so irrefutably true, that we can not, absolutely
can not, in any way help ourselves; that it is true, we are a people who live in the shadow and
darkness of death; that this is true, and is proclaimed to us in, with and under the word
“resurrection”—Oh, that is for us the bitter, unacceptable and unendurable truth which stirs us
to rebellion. That is the darkness in the clear word “resurrection.” Oh, yes, we gladly allow it
to be proclaimed to us, but that the victory in no sense grows or issues from us, that it is God’s
victory, and that this victory is contrary to our wishes, and comes as a result of our impotent
helplessness—is what we do not care to hear at all. “Ye were dead in your sins and
trespasses, in which ye walked according to the course of this world. But God, who is rich in mercy, has made us alive with Christ.” If only we could take the words, “God has made us alive” by themselves, without that word “but” which precedes it, and which so emphatically refers to our “being dead in our sins”! Nevertheless, it is true that wherever that crystal-clear word “resurrection” shall resound and be heard and understood, the prior word must be resounded and heard and perceived, which is—“Death.” It must be seen and understood that in the midst of life, even in blooming and healthy life, there is a yawning chasm, a deep pit that can not be filled by any art or power of man. Only one word is sufficient to cover this chasm, to fill this pit, and that is the word: “Jesus is victor!”—the word “resurrection.” First of all, one must see and realize that all the paths of life upon which we walk are the same, now or at any later time, in that they all lead to the same edge of the precipice, over which there is no bridge man can build in any case, but which in incomprehensible fashion has been made manifest in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Who would partake in this resurrection, must first have seen this chasm, have discovered this pit.

And life is not easy; on the contrary, it becomes dead in earnest and difficult wherever this word “resurrection” resounds, because this word is serious. It throws clear light upon our existence and in the clarity of it we see how dark our existence is. It proclaims true freedom to us and lets us painfully discover our prison chains. It tells us that the one and only and last refuge is God. But it tells us that only because it tells us that all our positions on life's battlefield are lost and that we must vacate them. Against this fact we defend ourselves. We do not tolerate this assessment and pronouncement upon our lives, which inheres in the resurrection proclamation. For that reason we deny the resurrection, or we, at least, minimize it. We alter it. We seek to minimize this maximum word. We seek to bedim that illuminating light that falls upon our existence. We denature that truth of its unconditional, wonderful, divine essence. We alter it into something human.

And then, in our preaching on Easter day, we say something about the rejuvenation of nature, or the romantic re-appearing of the blossoms, or the revival of the frozen torpid meadows. We interpret the message that Jesus is victor, not in its literal sense, but we interpret it as a symbol or a human idea. In that case the message tells us that the world is not so bad off. After each and all evils there naturally follows something good. One must not lose his courage! Only hope! And should it be that we stand beside graves and we talk about the resurrection, we should not think of it as a literal resurrection, but rather as a continuation of life in a spiritual sense, in a limbo-like, mystic-beyond, or, perhaps, in the memory of those loved ones who survive, or in those acts and deeds which the deceased one left behind. We may seek to be satisfied with this sort of a resurrection. We may get along very well for some time with the comfort that death is not so terrible. One must just not lose his courage! We may succeed for a long time with the romantic reappearing of the blossoms and the rejuvenation of spring, and thus forget the bitterness of present reality. It may be that even as we stand beside the graves of loved ones, we might find contentment in the thought of a spiritual continuation of this life. But the remarkable thing about it is that the real truth of the resurrection seems to be too strong for us, because it will not suffer itself to be hidden or concealed in these harmless clothes. It always breaks forth, through all these romantic dreams about re-appearing blossoms and the comforts which men offer each other, whereby we have concealed it; it rises up and shouts at us, asking us: “Do you really think that is all I have to say to you? Do you really believe that is why Jesus came to earth, why He agonized and suffered, why He was crucified and rose again on the third day, to become merely a symbol for the truth—which really is no truth—that eventually everything will be all right?”

And it is remarkable that this resurrection truth has a companion, namely life itself. Life itself stands up and, grasping us, asks? “Do you really think that by this easy and convenient way
you can solve me? Do you not yet understand what I am all about? Do not the riddles of your existence, your sins and your futile battles against it, your death, which you are daily approaching, do not these things give you enough to think about that you imagine you can come through all these dark things without an absolutely mighty, absolutely true, an absolutely ultimate word of victory that is the vital core of life? This mighty, true word of victory is resurrection! Is all this still obscure to you? Ah, this word is certainly not dark, it is your life that is dark. The world is dark because mankind is imprisoned." But we will not admit it. And as long as we will not admit it, the word “resurrection” will be a difficult word, a rock of offense, hard and offensive, because it is so sincere and because we can not honestly face it without having to admit that life is difficult, that the world is dark, that death is not child’s play, and that we are not done with our sins. No cultural education, no art, no evolutionary development helps me beyond my sins. I must receive assistance from the ground up. Then the steep walls of our security are broken to bits and we are forced to become humble, poor, pleading. Thus we are driven more and more to surrender and give up all that we have, surrender and give up those things which we formerly used to protect and defend and hold to ourselves against the voice of the resurrection’s truth which spoke to us so mightily out of the facts of life. Thus we edge over very close to the place where we can hear the great “but” which immediately follows, “But God who is rich in mercy, because of his great love wherewith he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.”

“But God!”—Yes, there resurrection is proclaimed. There eventuates a new emancipating beginning in the very midst of human transiency. There a new door opens, when all other exits are barricaded. There a new page is turned, the old is past, turned over and laid back. “But God, who is rich in mercy”—a tremendous, new and unexpected possibility opens to us after all possibilities are exhausted; a great, radiant freedom bursts forth after you harbored no more hope that you could escape the imprisonment of your character and your circumstances, your troubles and your burdens. “But God!” Perhaps you have not yet reckoned in earnest with that phrase. But you must now reckon with it and with nothing else. Perhaps you will now remark: “I cannot understand it, I do not sense it, I have not yet experienced it. It does not harmonize with my experience. I am not pious, not religiously inclined. In short, I do not have any rational ground to trust myself to it.” But I might reply: “Do you not understand that the resurrection is a goal for which there is no rational ground which requires no reason, to which no human support, human knowledge or human experience can be brought to prove or make it true? It is not a question as to whether you can grasp it or not, whether there is some supporting proof of it? but the main question is whether you have that freedom which is without ground or support, without knowledge, proof or experience in the midst of your impasse, darkness and the afflictions of your life and death.”

Do you have that freedom to breathe and be happy about this ‘but God’? That is the primary question. Are you free enough to let your life come to such a point, where without your assistance ‘even though you are dead in your sins’ this is true: ‘but God, who is rich in mercy . . .’ Yes, truer than your sin, truer than all your experiences and your thoughts, truer than all your doubts and afflictions, truer than death, graves and hell. This freedom God will gladly give you, this freedom to breathe in His atmosphere, even though you have a thousand griefs; this freedom to rise from the dead in the victorious power of Christ, even though you are a sinner and a mortal. This is the Easter message.

This is the Easter Gospel. Why do we not believe it? Why do we always strive against this mighty “but God, who is rich in mercy . . .”? Why do we not crash through the imprisoning wall of our thought-life which keeps us from the great resuscitation which can become our possession? Why is not this Gospel preached from every pulpit? Why is it not heard in all our
human constraints, upon all deathbeds and at the side of all graves? Why do we not really know that all have been made alive through the mercy of God? And even when we do know it, why is it not the one and only truth against which there is not anything of importance to invalidate it, because it pierces everything, suspends everything and renews everything? These questions are synonymous with the question: Why do we still think that we can live our life without God, even for one hour? Have we not yet sunk deep enough to see how little progress we can make alone? Yes, that is the enigma of all enigmas about which a great, single, tragic wonderment reigns in heaven—the fact that man thinks he can live and die in his own strength. On the one hand we find life with all its need and its enigmas, and on the other is God with all the lights and powers of the heavenly world, and in the midst is man in whom both seek to unite, whose existence shall become the stage upon which God desires to meet the needs of man, a stage of the resurrection, for that is resurrection. But man will not surrender his life to it; he rebels, he does not understand and will not believe, he hides himself even in the resurrection!

Yet all we can say is to repeat, “But God, who is rich in mercy . . .”; God will have done with this enigma, the enigma of our unbelief. He has already done with it. For the resurrection is not simply one word, one idea, a program. Resurrection is fact. Resurrection has happened. The contradiction is broken. The life of man has already become the stage of the divine triumphant mercy. Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. Let us ask God that He may conquer us through His word.