

Life through Death¹

Easter Sunday 2021

Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) lay deathly ill at age thirty when she received a series of mystical visions of Jesus' passion. In them, Julian beheld the sorrows and anguish Jesus experienced on the cross but also the profound joy he felt in suffering for her and for the whole human race. A few days later, she miraculously recovered, and rather than dying at 30, she lived to 74. She wrote down her visions in a book called *Revelations of Divine Love*. The title is apt because the visions illustrate God's immense—even overwhelming—love for us.

During one vision, Julian held in her hand something small, “no bigger than a hazelnut.” But God revealed to her that it was “everything which is made.” Imagine that—vast galaxies and cloudy nebulae all compressed into the size of an acorn! For a moment, Julian saw the universe through the Creator's eyes. Suddenly, she worried that because of its littleness, it might be harmed or suddenly collapse in on itself. But God reassured her that “it lasts and always will” because he loves it.

If it seems odd to be speaking of hazelnuts and the cosmos on Easter Sunday but we do so because “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16). God loved something so small from His perspective—something that fits in the palm of his hand! God loved us so deeply that he gave his only Son to rescue us! Isn't it staggering that Jesus would suffer on the cross for *us*? In her visions, Julian saw that through the cross, Christ “wraps us” and “encloses us” in his tender love. Through the cross, he grasps us by the hand (Isaiah 42:6). He lifts us up from the pit of sin. And he embraces us.²

But consider this. The God who holds the whole of the Universe in his hand, like Julian and the hazelnut, accomplished something even more remarkable. He lets you and me hold him in our hands or take him directly onto our tongues, (when not in COVID). This is what we do at every Eucharist when the priest says the “Body of Christ”. At this moment we are receiving the Risen Eucharistic Lord, for it was Jesus himself who determined this to be so. Think about this. After Pentecost, the only people to whom Jesus appeared bodily were St. Paul on the way to Damascus, and St. John in the Revelation, where he sees the glorified Jesus in heaven.

Here is the point. The risen Jesus can appear when he wills, where he wills, how he wills, and under whatever form he wills. After his resurrection and ascension into heaven, his normal manner of appearing to his disciples will not be in the form of a man, but under the veil of the Eucharist.

Remember that the first Easter Sunday Eucharist is recorded in Luke's Gospel with the two on the Road to Emmaus. On that day, Jesus ate and drank with these two disciples in the joy of his kingdom. On that day, he gave them his crucified and risen body and blood in the Eucharist. As he did so, Luke says that he vanished from their sight.³

¹ I am grateful to an essay in “That Nothing May be Lost” by Rev Paul D. Scalia that formed the title and the basis for the second part of this homily. Ignatius Press San Francisco 2017 pages 61-63

² [Monday of Holy Week - Mass Readings and Catholic Daily Meditations for March 29, 2021 | The Word Among Us \(wau.org\)](http://MondayofHolyWeek-MassReadingsandCatholicDailyMeditationsforMarch29,2021|TheWordAmongUs(wau.org))

³ Pitre, Brant James. Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist (pp. 201-202). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

The Eucharist therefore invites us to think about our lives in a special way. Often people will speak about life after death. But for Easter people, this isn't quite right. It isn't so much life after death but life through death. What do I mean by this? We all struggle with the relationship between this life and the life that is to come. And when people take this question seriously it influences how we live in the present.

Take as an example of this St. Paul in the reading for today from 1st Corinthians. Because we profess faith in the Resurrection from the dead whenever we celebrate the Festival of Easter – which is what we are doing at every Mass – we are not to live with evil and malicious intent, but lives marked by sincerity and truth.

St Peter in today's reading from Acts says that because of the life Jesus lived, going around doing good and healing those oppressed by the devil, we are to carry on his work, as those who are witnesses to his death and resurrection. But not only are we to proclaim how he has made a difference to our life in this world, but we are also to affirm that he is the one who is ordained by God to judge the living and the dead. That is, how we live in this life will determine how we are judged in the life that is to come.

Now this view of the interrelationship to this world and the next is anything but universal. Not all hold to this view. For instance, many people hold to the Epicurean philosophy of life. St. Paul thought this the best alternative if the Resurrection did not happen. In 1 Corinthians 15:32: he put it this way:

*If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die"*⁴

Eastern religions view the afterlife as not very lively at all. Their nirvana is not bliss but negation, the absorption of the individual person into a state of cosmic unity.

But what about those who adhere to the Easter faith, who take the Resurrected Christ in their hands on into their mouths? Christianity does not profess so much life after death but life through death. This is what Easter Sunday declares as we heard in the reading from John 20. Although the Apostles didn't yet understand how the Scriptures declared so comprehensively this teaching, this is something they would come to know and then teach it to others. It is this same declaration that the Church has proclaimed every Sunday and especially every Easter for 2000 plus years. Life through death.

Jesus used a very simple agricultural image to teach this. As a grain of wheat dies in the ground, that death becomes the very principle of the new life. Think about this in relation to Jesus. It is not that he died on Friday and rose on Sunday. Rather, His dying and rising are intimately connected, mutually dependent. His passion contains the seeds of his Resurrection, while His risen body maintains the wounds of His Crucifixion.

So, it is for every follower of the Crucified and Risen One: the extent to which we die, determines the extent of our rising. That is the more deeply we unite ourselves with Christ in

⁴ [*The Holy Bible*](#). (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, 1 Co 15:32). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

Passion and death, the more we rise to newness of life. St Paul put it this way in 2 Corinthians 4:10-11: We are

always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. ¹¹ For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

Our daily dying in the form of sacrifices, mortifications, and selfless acts of charity is the principle of our living a deeper intimacy with Christ. An intimacy that St Julian discovered at 30 where she came to know that it is life through death, not life after death that defines the Christian way.