

# Resurrection without Regrets

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Zenos Frudakis (American, 1951–), *Freedom*, 2001. Bronze, 8 × 20 ft. 16th and Vine Streets, Philadelphia.

Preaching on:

Matthew 28: 1–10

I woke up this morning feeling pretty lousy. Part of the reason is that I have strep throat. (This is why I'm wearing a mask and why I'm going to be keeping my distance from all of you this morning.) This is the third time in two months that we've had strep in the house, but this one is really special because all five of us are taking antibiotics at the same time, which is a new and unbeatable record.

But also (I'll be honest with you) as a minister, Easter can be pretty intimidating. Expectations among

the flock are high. Lots of visitors coming in. Everybody, of course, hoping to feel that spark of Easter joy. And I want to deliver. I do! But on Easter Sunday especially I find myself waking up in the morning feeling inadequate to such a great task. Ministers, after all, are not saints. We don't perform miracles. All we can do, all we can do is point out the miracles, dress the miracles up in some fancy words, and hope that that plus a bunch of flowers and outstanding music and an Easter egg hunt will somehow be enough. Ministers can't MAKE a holiday holy for anyone. Sometimes I feel like a traffic cop at a busy intersection frantically waving my arms around and blowing my whistle like a maniac in the hope, in the hope that the drivers will get the message and not just speed by blowing their horns.

I left the house this morning just before sunrise to walk down to Starbucks for some Easter fuel. And as soon as I stepped out the door resurrection erupted all around me. The birds in my backyard were going crazy with singing: Squeaky robins, wild chirping sparrows, crying doves, a whole bunch of beautiful songs I couldn't identify, even in the distance the cawing of the crows was echoing. "Nice try," I said to God, "But thanks to you I have a very busy morning of trying to work miracles, and I have no time for your little show!" And I marched through my backyard.

Walking down Clark Street, I looked up in the sky and the almost-full moon was still bright just above the rooftops and there ahead of me, tracing the pink ribbon of the sunrise, was the elusive and beautiful Great Blue Heron in flight, perhaps just returning from the Caribbean or further south to come home to its breeding grounds. And I thought, "Is every spring morning just as beautiful as this? Or is it special just because I'm desperately looking for a little inspiration for my Easter sermon—desperate to point out life and miracles to a world speeding by blowing their horns at me.

And then I got the lot behind Starbucks, the resurrection chorus of the birds following me the whole way down, and then I heard way off in the distance a very unmusical honking. Like two car horns battling it out on the street. And then, right above my head, two Canada geese come dropping, honking down out the sky and they splash themselves down right in the middle of the Glen Ridge Community Pool, looking very pleased with themselves.

And now it felt like Easter was just taking over the whole world. And that's when I remembered that even though no minister has the power to work miracles on Easter morning, God does. There is a special power on display on Easter morning (and for all I know every morning). And I know it works best if you're paying attention to it, if you're looking for it. But even if you're just speeding by, sometimes God reaches out and grabs you with the power of that wild goose the Holy Spirit. And maybe on this Easter morning, whether you're looking for it or not, God will grab you with the power of resurrection. Do you think that's a possibility?

The title of my sermon this morning is Resurrection NOW. Because for Christians resurrection has never been just about what happened to Jesus 2000 years ago. It has never just been about the future resurrection that scripture and tradition promise will come to all of us around the final judgment.

Resurrection—as a miraculous power of life and transformation—has always been about how we are living our lives right now. The Apostle Paul tells us that in baptism all of us have come to share in Jesus' death and Jesus' resurrection. It's strange to think of ourselves as having died already. It's strange to think of living like we were already resurrected, but that's what Paul says our faith life should be like—live like you're already dead and like (through the grace and power of God) you're already on the other side of resurrection.

This Lent I reread a bestseller from about a decade ago--*The Top Five Regrets of the Dying: A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing*, by Bronnie Ware. Ware worked for many years as a palliative care nurse in hospice and got to know her dying patients very well. She noticed that all of them, in dying, were going through a process of transformation. And in that process of life review, they would speak to her about their lives—their memories, their joys, and (almost always) their regrets. According to Ware, the five most common regrets of the dying were:

1. "I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me."
2. "I wish I hadn't worked so hard."
3. "I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings."
4. "I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends."
5. "I wish that I had let myself be happier."

As I was reading the book, I started thinking: If we Christians really share in Jesus' death and resurrection, then what better time than the Easter season, to seize resurrection NOW, and flip these regrets on their heads. If these are the top five regrets of the dying and if we're living in faith by the power of resurrection, then let's live NOW in a way that won't leave us with so many regrets when our time comes. So, throughout the season of Easter I'm going to be coming back to regrets 2 through 5 preaching about work-life balance, expressing our deepest feelings to one another, the importance of friendship, and how to be truly happy. But to kick us off on this Easter Sunday, I want to touch on the biggest regret of all: *I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life that others expected of me.*

Ware says that this one is the most common regret of all. That when people realize that life is coming to a close and they look back, they see clearly all of the unfulfilled dreams, all of the values left un-lived, the stories that they had hoped to write for themselves but never did. She says that when the dying look back they often see that they have not honored even half of their dreams and they die knowing that this is most often due to choices they made or failed to make in their lives.

Ware recommends to us that we try to live out our dreams before it's too late. She says that we often don't recognize how precious the days of our lives are. On Tim Urban's fascinating blog, *Wait But Why*, there's a 2014 post called "Your Life in Weeks" in which a very generous 90-year human life was graphed out in weeks. And when you see a human life reduced to a mere 4,680 little weeks, it strikes you just how little time we have to be or to become the people we most want to be. Urban graphs our

weeks out as little squares, and plots out all kinds of interesting things in the post, but what astounded me most was the fact that 4,680 squares is just two sheets of standard graph paper.

What better day than Easter to begin to plot out your dreams on the squares of your life. What is it that you want to do? Who do you want to be? What do you want to achieve? If nothing comes to mind, God bless you. You are a saint and a true spiritual genius. You need nothing from me. But I think most of us when asked these questions feel that there is something we long to do, someone we long to be that we just haven't had the time or the opportunity or the resources or the courage to make happen yet. If that's the case, you and I have a limited number of weeks left to live those dreams. So, what better time to start than right now, on a day that is full of God's miraculous resurrection power?

And I will leave you with one resurrection recommendation. Whatever your dreams are, don't forget what resurrection tells us about ourselves and about our purpose as human beings: God came to us in human form in Jesus Christ. This was a very strange thing for God to do. How could God, who is holy and perfect, take on physical form, which is unholy and imperfect? But the early Church told us that God did this out of love for us. And don't worry. Doing it didn't make God less holy or less perfect. It made being human more holy and more perfect than it had ever been before.

And God came to us in human form to love us and relate to us in ways God had not been able to before. Moses could only look upon God's back with his eyes closed. If he had looked at God's face he would have died. But Jesus lived with us face to face, touching us, teaching us, feeding us, healing us, embracing us as only another creature can. Drawing us more closely and intimately into communion with God. And Jesus died for us in total forgiveness of our unavoidable sins and human imperfections. And then Jesus was resurrected, not just because he wanted to be alive again, but in order that all of us might become a part of his body, and in becoming a part of his body that we might share in his resurrection life starting now.

Pursue your dreams this Easter. And never forget that one of your destinies as a human being, one of the reasons you exist, and one of the great joys of being alive, is to be united to God through Jesus Christ. Whatever other dreams you pursue—and please do pursue them—may they lead you closer to that great purpose—relationship, love, and even union between you and the one who made you, came to earth for you, died for you, and rose for you. Beloved, Christ is risen, and by the power of Christ, so are we.